LV YE QIAN HE
THE WIFE COMES FIRST
QI WEI SHANG
2

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THE
WIFE
COMES
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QI WEI SHANG
2

THE WIFE COMES FIRST

QI WEI SHANG

NOVEL

2

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Chapter 40:
Army Barracks

BY THE TIME Mu Hanzhang woke up, it was already long past midmorning.

All his muscles were loose and wobbly, and every inch of his body ached; it was almost impossible to even open his eyes, and he felt like he was still being jostled around. In a daze, Mu Hanzhang thought, *That scoundrel—how many times did he end up doing it last night?* As he'd passed out from exhaustion, that guy had still been tirelessly plowing away.

A noise like wooden wheels rumbling over stone kept fading in and out of his awareness. His long eyelashes trembled, then fluttered as he gradually managed to open a pair of beautiful, hazy eyes. The view above him momentarily disoriented him. The canopy looked rather odd today, like the ceiling of a…carriage?

Realization began dawning over Mu Hanzhang—something was off. As he tried to sit up, the ache in his lower back made him frown, so he leaned against the wall of the carriage for support.

The inside of the carriage was tastefully furnished, with a platform covered in a thick, soft padding over most of the floor and a cooling jade-studded woven mat on top. Embedded in the walls were shelves adorned with books and decorative items, one of which was an incense burner; in a recessed area sat his shoes and a small table, and on it, there was a water pouch and two cups.

A comfortable jade bead mat lay beneath him, and pillows of various sizes engulfed him, each thoughtfully wrapped in a cover woven with jade disks. Squinting, Mu Hanzhang drew aside the pale, gauzy curtain to glance outside. Through the carriage's window, he spotted a handsome black horse upon which sat his invigorated prince—a man who ought to have already left for his military encampment!

Jing Shao was in high spirits as he rode Shadow. He'd so thoroughly enjoyed himself last night that he, too, had slept in. Since it would have been unthinkable to wake the still slumbering Junqing, he'd carried him to the carriage he had prepared in advance while he'd still dozed.

After leaving the estate to Steward Yun, Duofu, and his worried, scrunched up face, he happily brought his consort along with him to the military camp less than seventeen miles south of the capital.

Suddenly feeling eyes upon him, Jing Shao turned to the carriage and found his consort's handsome face peeking through its window. He promptly waved at the coachman to stop the carriage and leaped from Shadow's back so he could step inside.

"You're awake?" he asked, beaming at him. After pouring a cup of water, he handed it to Mu Hanzhang.

Instead of taking the cup, Mu Hanzhang simply leaned back against the carriage's wall and watched him silently.

Jing Shao coughed self-consciously, wilting under that gaze. "Don't sit like that."

Taking off his shoes, he climbed onto the bedding, grabbed a large bolster pillow from the pile, and helped his sore and tired consort to lean on

it.

Ingratiatingly, he held the cup to his consort's lips. "Have a sip of water. Yun Song will bring over some food in a bit."

"Where are you taking me?" Uncharacteristically, Mu Hanzhang did not decline and drank the whole cup of water from Jing Shao's hand. But he never stopped staring at him in that quiet way of his.

Nervousness tittered out of Jing Shao. "My army is in need of a strategist, and you weren't doing anything in the capital anyway, so why not come to Xinan with me?"

Scratching his head, he turned around to pour Mu Hanzhang another cup of water.

"When a general is deployed, his family cannot leave the capital." Mu Hanzhang glanced at the cup raised to his lips. On the bolster pillow, his fingers slowly stroked one smooth jade disk.

"Didn't we leave a concubine at the estate? You don't need to worry about that," Jing Shao said proudly. "I was planning to take you with me in secret, but when I mentioned it to Father yesterday, he actually agreed to it. As long as we don't let anyone know about your identity as Princely Consort Cheng, it'll be fine."

***

THE CARRIAGE RUMBLED off down the road…leaving His Highness in the dust, holding his shoes in his hands and looking quite the pitiful sight.

Jing Shao stood there in a daze for an age before he remembered he was barefoot. He'd truly, actually been chased out of the carriage by his consort, and so swiftly that he hadn't even had enough time to put his shoes on!

He turned to a certain similarly abandoned mount. Shadow had idly grabbed a leaf with his teeth and was munching on it. When he noticed his master's stare, he snorted at him rather disdainfully, a sound that resembled laughter, as though mocking his misfortunate circumstances.

"How dare you laugh at me, punk!" Jing Shao grabbed Shadow's mane angrily and vigorously rubbed his big head. "You don't even have a wife yet! I'm better than you!"

***

TRAVELING BY CARRIAGE was slower than on horseback, so by the time they reached the camp, dusk had arrived before them.

The military encampment was situated on an open, flat field, surrounded by a forest of tall poplars, with tents lined up in neat rows. Between them patrolled squads of soldiers armed with spears, and torches crackled loudly in their iron braziers.

"Your Highness!" When the sentry spotted Jing Shao riding Shadow toward the camp, he signaled those below to open the wooden gate.

Several high-ranking soldiers clad in armor approached at a run, then stopped and knelt before him. "Greetings, Your Highness!"

“Rise, everyone!” Jing Shao said, dismounting.

He patted the shoulder of the man kneeling in front, then without waiting for everyone to rise, he turned and walked to the front of the carriage to slowly draw the curtain aside.

“Junqing, come on out,” he said, extending a hand toward the door in a deferential manner.

Clearly unappreciative of this gesture, the man inside shoved the curtain further out of his way so he could step out, refusing Jing Shao’s assistance.

The soldiers watched as Mu Hanzhang alighted from the carriage. His Highness had brought with him a stunningly handsome young man—his pale cyan formal robe with broad sleeves starkly contrasted against the many soldiers in their military attire and armor. His cultured, scholarly air, too, seemed particularly out of place.

“Your Highness, and this is?” the soldier at the front asked. He was quite intimidating; somewhere north of thirty, he was burly and tall.

“This is my strategist, Jun Qing—Master Jun,” said Jing Shao, smiling as he presented him to everyone.

A strategist? The generals exchanged glances of disbelief. His Highness had never brought a strategist along on an expedition before, and the times were not so turbulent and violent that they required supremely talented statesmen and great generals in order to chart the fate of the nation.

Mu Hanzhang’s detached gaze swept over the crowd, and he gave them all a cupped-hands salute. Military officers had always had a low tolerance for academics. It was only natural that these people would harbor hostility

toward a strategist coming out of nowhere, so he wasn't at all bothered by the sudden coldness in their eyes.

Jing Shao's brows furrowed slightly, but this wasn't the right time for him to intercede. Instead, he introduced everyone to his consort, one by one.

The man at the front was Zhao Meng, General Zhao. Behind him stood two other soldiers: one stone-faced, the Left Guardian, and the other smiling, the Right Guardian.

"Your Highness, as you did not inform me ahead of time, I was unable to prepare a tent for the strategist." Looking the frail, bookish Mu Hanzhang up and down, Zhao Meng said, rather disdainfully, "He will have to make do with sharing lodgings with our soldiers."

Jing Shao knew that General Zhao was just trying to give Junqing a hard time, but since it happened to align with exactly what Jing Shao wanted, he promptly feigned generosity and said, "That's quite all right; the strategist can just stay with This Prince."

"How is that in any way acceptable? Someone else staying in Your Highness's tent would be a breach of protocol!" said Zhao Meng gruffly.

"I can stay anywhere," said Mu Hanzhang, his voice gentle and calm and his words measured and pleasant. "There's no need to feel obligated to go to any trouble on my behalf. Just assign me to any tent at your convenience."

"How could our delicate new strategist possibly find it acceptable to sleep in one of those random stinky tents? If you don't mind, you can come stay with me," snickered the Right Guardian, moving in close, a cheeky grin on his face.

Jiang Shao's head practically lit on fire from rage, and he smacked the Right Guardian upside the head. "Don't any of you even fucking think about it. The strategist will stay with This Prince."

This said, he ignored the rest of them and grabbed Mu Hanzhang's arm, dragging him toward the biggest tent in the military camp.

Watching the two retreating figures, Zhao Meng sniffed contemptuously and left.

The Right Guardian smirked. "That strategist is gorgeous. Can you believe that old rascal Zhao Meng bullied him like that?"

The Left Guardian glanced at him, then fell silent.

His gaze still trained on the now-gone prince and strategist, the Right Guardian waited and waited for the Left Guardian to respond, but he said nothing. Finally, the Right Guardian turned to face him, only to find his back fading into the dark. He hurriedly chased after the other guardian.

"Hey, hey, don't leave without me!"

***

THE ROYAL TENT PREPARED for Prince Cheng was far roomier than the others. The ground was left bare of carpeting, as in the summer, the chill that rose from it at night was quite refreshing. A spacious bed had been set up on a wooden platform; nights in the countryside were cool, which meant it didn't need to be covered in a mat and used bedding of smooth brocade

instead. This was immediately the most tempting thing in the room to Mu Hanzhang, since he was still sore all over.

Seeing his consort climb onto the bed as soon as he entered the tent, Jing Shao rubbed the tip of his nose and inched closer, one hand tentatively caressing Mu Hanzhang's waist.

"Does it still hurt?"

Mu Hanzhang cast him a sidelong glance. "Why doesn't Your Highness try it yourself next time and find out?"

Jing Shao laughed awkwardly and tactfully shut his mouth, then began to massage earnestly from Mu Hanzhang's waist to the upper part of his buttocks. His consort's body heat emanated through his thin summer garment, its soft silk clearly outlining his wonderful curves. As Jing Shao's big hands massaged, he couldn't resist sliding them lower and lower.

"Get them to prepare another tent for me tomorrow," Mu Hanzhang said coolly from his sprawled perch on the pillow, not even sparing him a single glance.

"No way!" Jing Shao immediately refused, dutifully sliding his wandering hands back up to Junqing's waist.

"What kind of strategist shares a tent with the prince?"

Mu Hanzhang let out a little yawn. The carriage ride had been bumpy, and all his varied discomforts had made his rest rather unsound, so now sleepiness was properly seeping into him.

"The strategist needs to stay with the marshal to more effectively go over battle plans at any given time!" Jing Shao asserted confidently. "This has been the case since time immemorial."

Mu Hanzhang rolled his eyes. He was well read and familiar with all manner of historical records and had never heard about a dynasty with any such rule. That said, he couldn't be bothered to argue with nonsense, and the alternating pressure on his waist was so perfectly soothing that he continued quietly lying still, letting Jing Shao knead away.

Just when Jing Shao thought Mu Hanzhang had fallen asleep, the consort suddenly asked, softly, "Why did you lie to me last night?"

"Huh?" Surprised, Jing Shao scratched his head and said unconvincingly, "I didn't tell a single lie! It was true that we were going to be in the camp soon, and with the march and the fighting ahead, we'd need to conserve our strength, so finding opportunities to be intimate will surely be a challenge!"

"It's good you're aware of that, Your Highness. In that case, perhaps you should go sleep with General Zhao tonight," said Mu Hanzhang. He promptly grabbed the brocade quilt to cover himself, turning to face away from the prince to ignore him.

"Junqing…" Jing Shao called out, woefully.

Zhao Meng hollered from outside the tent. "Your Highness, are you asleep? If you're not asleep, come drink with us at the command pavilion!"

Jing Shao rubbed his temple in frustration. He wanted to shout to chase him away, but he was loath to disturb the man lying next to him, so he had no choice but to go to the door.

"What are you yelling about? This Prince is tired. I don't feel like drinking tonight." After he said this, he turned to go back inside.

“Your Highness, I have something to say.” Zhao Meng grabbed Jing Shao and started dragging him away from the tent.

“Then say it!” Jing Shao said, voice fraught with impatience, as he shook off Zhao Meng’s hold.

“I don’t know where you got this strategist from, but, Your Highness, the route to Xinan is riddled with danger, and I fear his constitution may not be able to withstand the journey. And besides, if an armchair tactician blindly orders the army about without knowing how a war is fought, it will inevitably lead us into disaster.” Zhao Meng spoke with the strong, resonant voice of a martial artist, and since he’d barely taken two steps from the tent, Mu Hanzhang naturally heard his every word.

“This Prince is mindful of the situation.” Jing Shao furrowed his brows and sighed. “I know you’re not yet convinced, but you must stop unilaterally judging people and situations. I won’t insist you accept him as a strategist right away—you can reassess that in time. But here’s the thing: I went to great lengths to recruit Master Jun. Even if you don’t agree with his presence, you must not show him any disrespect, and you must never place him in danger! If anything were to happen to him, This Prince would show no mercy.”

“Hmph, I’m not about to give a scholar who isn’t even strong enough to truss a chicken a hard time.” Feeling he’d been belittled, Zhao Meng scoffed with disdain, saying, “But if he tries to order me around, he better not expect me to put up with it!”

“All right, all right, stop your nagging and get out of here. This Prince wishes to sleep.” Jing Shao flapped his hand, shooing him away like he was a fly.

Zhao Meng took a couple of steps before turning and stubbornly trying his luck one more time. “Your Highness, are you really not going to come have a drink?”

He ran away before Jing Shao’s kick could land.

Once General Zhao was gone, Jing Shao gazed wistfully at the royal tent behind him. Not daring to go back in quite yet, he was left to wander aimlessly through the camp.

Chapter 41:
Shadow

A HUSH FELL OVER the military camp after dark, with even the patrolling soldiers choosing not to chat with each other. Piercing through that silence was the sound of the three higher-ranking generals inside the command pavilion carousing and playing a game of Morra.[1] All three of them had fought the Xiongnu with Jiang Shao and had gotten used to living wild and untamed on the great sands, so even now, on the outskirts of the capital, they still had no idea how to restrain themselves. He'd have to discipline them later to keep their behavior in check. Jing Shao shook his head and walked past them into the distance.

Now that the conflict against the Xinan Fiefdom had begun three full years earlier than it had in his past life, he possessed an incredible advantage. The Commander of the Eastern Campaign, who had defied him at every turn in his past life, had been deployed to reinforce Jing Rong, and Father hadn't sent anyone else on this expedition to supervise him. This meant he was free to do much more. However, with endless possibilities before him, he had no idea where he should begin.

Shadow, who was eating fodder in the stables, lifted his head to whinny at his master in greeting.

Jing Shao had somehow made it all the way to the stables. He walked to Shadow's trough and rubbed the horse's big black head that seemed to blend into the darkness of the night.

Annoyed, Shadow shook his head, then shuffled slightly away so he could continue to chew on the fodder that had been prepared for him.

It was bad enough to be thrown out of his tent by the princely consort —now, even his horse was snubbing him! Jing Shao tugged on Shadow's ear. "Stop eating. This Prince doesn't even have a place to sleep anymore; how can you still eat at a time like this?!"

Shadow raised his head and stared at his owner with large black eyes as he chewed on a mouthful of grass. Since Shadow was the prince's beloved steed, the stable hand gathered fresh feed for him every day, his rations far superior to the dry hay given to the other horses.

Shadow was accustomed to Jing Shao's occasional ear tugging, so he continued to munch away without paying him any mind.

Jing Shao glared back at him for a while, but he had no chance of winning a staring contest against those great big horse eyes, so he was forced to drop it. He used a post to lever himself up and took a seat on the wooden railing. Then he plucked a straw from the trough before sticking it in his mouth. The stem was slightly bitter, and only the white part in the middle had any sweetness to it. He wondered how Shadow could eat it so happily.

"Shadow, once this war is over, let's find you a wife."

Jing Shao gazed up at the bright moon; outside the city, the moon seemed particularly cold and distant. In his past life, he'd never had the leisure to appreciate the night sky like this. All he'd ever thought about were battle formations, drilling the troops, practicing his martial arts, and seizing the throne. He had lived to be thirty, yet he'd always been exhausted. It really hadn't been worth it.

He fed the single blade of straw he'd chewed on to Shadow. "Say, do you want a stallion or a mare?"

Shadow neighed again, and shooting a look at the measly offering in his master's hand, he snorted at it with disdain before retreating into his stall for the night.

Jing Shao, rejected even by his own mount, left the stable behind and sneaked back into the royal tent. On the bed, Mu Hanzhang lay on his side, one arm resting outside the quilt, and he slept so peacefully that it seemed he hadn't moved since Jing Shao had left.

Jing Shao quietly took off his outer robes, then lifted the corner of the quilt and slipped under.

Mu Hanzhang shifted slightly, but perhaps because he'd grown used to having Jing Shao by his side, he did not stir.

Jing Shao's mouth quirked up, and he carefully tucked Mu Hanzhang's exposed arm back under the covers before slowly slipping one of his own below Mu Hanzhang's ribs, tentatively pulling him into his embrace.

He let out a soft hum, startling Jing Shao and making him freeze. After waiting for a moment without any signs of Junqing waking, Jing Shao finally relaxed. He tucked the covers under him and buried his face into the crook of his consort's neck, content. As he inhaled the light fragrance on Junqing's body, he nuzzled in gently before happily closing his eyes.

Jing Shao had a great constitution and had always fallen asleep the moment his head hit the pillow, so he missed the way a smile slowly graced the lips of the man in his arms.

***

BECAUSE HE'D SLEPT so much the day before, Mu Hanzhang woke up rather early. The bright morning sun shone directly onto the tent's white canopy, highlighting the fabric's pattern above him. From beneath it, he stared in confusion before abruptly recalling that he was no longer in the Prince Cheng Estate but at the field camp. The man beside him was still deep in slumber, letting out soft, contented snores. His hot breath brushed the nape of Mu Hanzhang's neck, ruffling some loose strands of his hair and gently tickling him.

Mu Hanzhang shifted and turned to face Jing Shao, watching his sleeping face. He had believed they were going to be apart for months, perhaps even years; it would have been a lie to say he hadn't been saddened by the thought. He had even been determined to run a business somewhere near the battlefield if the prince was to be gone for years, never expecting that this man had already worked everything out.

Reaching out with a long, slender finger, Mu Hanzhang softly tapped the handsome, prominent bridge of Jing Shao's nose, unable to contain the smile that creased the corners of his eyes. He was no longer angry about the underhanded trick Jing Shao had pulled, but such bad habits should not be indulged.

The soft pressure on the tip of his nose had Jing Shao opening his eyes drowsily, and when he saw a finger as gentle and smooth as jade, he opened his mouth and gently snatched it in between his teeth, licking the rounded fingertip.

Mu Hanzhang withdrew his hand and quietly watched until Jing Shao's eyes were fully open.

"Junqing, you're awake," Jing Shao chuckled, conveniently forgetting his punishment of sharing a tent with a certain stubborn, smelly general. He leaned in to kiss his consort's soft, supple lips. "It's still pretty early. I'll go train the troops, and once morning drills are done, I'll come back here to have breakfast with you."

Before the man in his arms could grill him, Jing Shao jumped out of bed to dress, changing into moon blue martial attire, and sped out of the tent right after his face was washed.

Mu Hanzhang sat up slowly. Seeing Jing Shao run out like he was trying to escape, he couldn't help letting out a soft chuckle.

Since he couldn't fall asleep again anyway, Mu Hanzhang rose and got dressed. There was an elegant wooden chest in the tent, the very same one that had been unloaded from the carriage yesterday. It mostly contained his clothes and the items that he used every day; clearly, Jing Shao had prepared for this trip well in advance.

"You're awake, my lord."

Yun Song came to bring him tea, and when he saw Mu Hanzhang had already dressed, he hurriedly went to get water for him to wash his face and rinse his mouth. They couldn't reveal the princely consort's identity while they were outside the confines of the estate, and since he wasn't a part of the army, he couldn't call Mu Hanzhang "Master Jun" like everyone else, so he addressed him as "my lord" instead.

"Are you coming on this expedition as well?" Mu Hanzhang asked as he took the towel from Yun Song and wiped his face. It stood to reason that a

pageboy from a prince's estate could not be brought along on a campaign.

"I'm only staying at the camp for a fortnight to run errands for you and His Highness, my lord. Once the army sets off, I will be returning to the estate." With a smile, Yun Song added, "Yun Zhu made a fuss yesterday about coming along, but His Highness didn't let him."

"Are you familiar with this field camp?" Mu Hanzhang nodded slightly, took a teacup from Yun Song, and then sipped from it.

"This encampment contains His Highness's Vanguard Battalion. I've been here several times, actually," Yun Song answered truthfully.

When Mu Hanzhang heard this, his brows came together, and he pushed the tent flap aside. The scent of earth that rose in the early morning wafted toward his face, lifting his spirits. "In that case, let's go for a walk around the camp."

At this time of day, almost all of the soldiers had gone to the training grounds for morning drills. Only those from the logistics camp remained, fulfilling their many duties. The fire in the braziers had already been put out, and wisps of smoke rose from their embers.

Through Yun Song, Mu Hanzhang learned that there were just over five thousand troops in this field camp, and they were all directly under Jing Shao's command. They usually didn't camp out here, staying, instead, in Qi County—more than thirty miles away. Some of these soldiers belonged to the elite vanguard that Jing Shao had cultivated during his expulsion of the Xiongnu, and after he'd returned from the northwest and relinquished his command, His Majesty had graciously granted Prince Cheng these five thousand troops and a large expanse of land in Qi County.

Speaking of Qi County, Mu Hanzhang was reminded of the twenty acres of fertile land that Jing Shao wanted to trade him for his overgrown woodland. According to the servants who had gone to inspect it, it was very productive, lush farmland, and soldiers were stationed there who helped with the farming. So, it seemed that was where Jing Shao's military camp was located.

"Mister Wang Er, how come the porridge is getting thinner by the day?" Two young soldiers huffed and panted while they carried a large wooden cask to an open area between four tents.

"We've got steamed buns too, don't we? Having a bowl of soup to go with it is enough." The man who was apparently Mister Wang Er brought over a great big basket of steamed buns and set it down next to the wooden cask.

Curious, Mu Hanzhang walked over to examine the food, and the three glanced at him suspiciously before exchanging looks with each other. Last night, a rumor had spread throughout the camp that His Highness had brought along a rather handsome strategist and had even shared a tent with him. Needless to say, this must have been him.

"Master Jun, you're sure up early," Wang Er said in greeting. Since the strategist was being accompanied by His Highness's pageboy, it would be impolite for Wang Er to pretend he hadn't seen him.

Mu Hanzhang gave him a slight nod and amiably inquired, "Is breakfast always like this? Why are there no side dishes?" Right now, since Jing Shao had deemed it so, he was a mere strategist, which was to say, a strategist in name only, an advisor at best. Without a title, he couldn't put on airs around these soldiers.

“Aye, it’s enough as long as it fills you up. We’re soldiers—we don’t worry about requiring side dishes.” Wang Er signaled the two soldiers behind him with a glance and added, “We still have to go back to carry out more food, so go ahead and wander around as much as you like, Master Jun.”

One of the soldiers helping him looked to want to say something more, but as he glanced at this strategist with his neat, clean robes, self-consciousness made him shy away. He wiped his hands on his large apron and swiftly followed Wang Er away.

“So…Mister Wang Er, that strategist is really pretty. Do you think it’s really true, that he’s actually His Highness’s lov—”

Wang Er slapped a hand over the young soldier’s mouth. “Shhh… Don’t talk nonsense in broad daylight.”

***

BY THE TIME Mu Hanzhang got back to the royal tent, Jing Shao had already bathed and was sitting at the dining table waiting for him. The prince’s breakfast was not much more lavish than that of an ordinary soldier, with only the addition of a dish of stir-fried greens and a plate of peanuts.

It had never occurred to Jing Shao that Mu Hanzhang might not be able to stomach this kind of food, but he noticed immediately that he was frowning slightly. With a note of apology in his voice, he said, “Life in an army camp is a bit austere, so if you can’t eat it, I can ask the cook from the estate to come along with us…”

“Sharing the same meals as your troops is something you ought to be doing anyway,” Mu Hanzhang said, sitting in front of the dining table and picking up a rice bowl. “I’m just curious—the Ministry of Revenue didn’t skimp on your funding this time, so why is this camp still living so cheaply?”

“Funding?” Jing Shao took a bite of his steamed bun. “With this many troops, no matter how much money we’re given, it’s never enough.”

Worried that eating and talking at the same time might make him bite his tongue, Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together and refrained from asking more questions, but internally, he was plotting how he would go about auditing the military’s books. The fact that the soldiers were not eating well was secondary, but if someone was embezzling military funds, once the army set out on their march and the Ministry of Revenue sent someone over to audit the accounts, there’d be trouble if there were discrepancies in their accounting.

“Your Highness! Your Highness, something terrible has happened!” A young soldier suddenly ran up to the tent’s door and shouted, “It looks like your steed has taken ill!”

Chapter 42:
Wolfsbane

"SHADOW?" ALARMED, Jing Shao put down his chopsticks and bowl and ran outside. The horse had been doing fine just last night, so why had he suddenly become sick?

"Your Highness!" Mu Hanzhang looked at Jing Shao's half-eaten meal, breathed out a helpless sigh, then stood up and strode after him.

Inside the stables, Shadow was snorting testily. The grass from his trough had been scattered all over the ground and trampled beneath his hooves. Nearby, the stable hand was hunched over clutching his stomach, clearly having just been kicked by Shadow.

So energetic—wasn't he supposedly sick? Jing Shao told the soldiers attempting to calm the horse to step aside, then, kicking lightly off a post, he leaped onto Shadow's back, grabbing the reins. Shadow immediately straightened and neighed. Now that his master was here, he finally stopped fighting and snorted out a breath of hot air. Still, he wouldn't stop pawing at the ground.

"Junqing, don't come over just yet," Jing Shao said, promptly stopping Mu Hanzhang from approaching, worried Shadow might accidentally lash out and hurt him.

Zhao Meng approached from another direction, and noticing Mu Hanzhang standing three paces away, he quipped, "Yes, you wouldn't want the horse to injure your delicate skin."

“Zhao Meng! Shut your mouth!” Jing Shao glared at the needlessly loose-tongued General Zhao and only dismounted once Shadow had calmed down. Looking around at the mess, he asked the crouching stable hand, “What happened here?”

“Your Highness, I got up late this morning and didn’t have the chance to cut fresh grass for Shadow, so I tried to give him some dry fodder. But as soon as took a bite, he spat it out and went berserk.” The stable hand told the whole story from his prostrated perch on the floor, fearful that His Highness would blame him for the situation.

“Oh, this horse is getting picky with its food now? That’s why you shouldn’t spoil animals!” Jing Shao exclaimed.

General Zhao seemed unfazed by His Highness’s scolding. He stepped forward and patted Shadow before turning to Mu Hanzhang. “Why do you hesitate to come forward, Master Jun? You’ll never make it if you’re as timid as a woman when we’re on the battlefield.”

Ignoring General Zhao’s rude words, Mu Hanzhang walked over to the trough and examined it carefully. Frowning, he picked up a single straw of grass. He turned to the stable hand. “Have all the horses in this stable been fed this same fodder?”

Unable to understand why the strategist was asking him this, he glanced up at the prince before answering truthfully. He had been worried that Shadow wouldn’t care for dry feed, so he’d specially given Shadow the fodder that had been newly delivered. This fresh supply hadn’t dried completely and part of it was still green, so it should have been tastier than dry hay.

Jing Shao sensed that something was off. He asked Mu Hanzhang, “Junqing, is there a problem?”

“There’s wolfsbane in this!” Mu Hanzhang handed the stalk to Jing Shao.

Zhao Meng picked up a handful of grass. “Wolfsbane? Isn’t this just ordinary thatching grass?”

Jing Shao studied the blade of grass he’d been given. The half-dry leaf was still tinged with green, slightly wider than thatch, and wasn’t prickly to the touch. Horses were quite attuned to the edible nature of plants and could distinguish which were poisonous. They wouldn’t eat them unless they were absolutely famished. Since Shadow had dined to his heart’s content last night, he’d naturally been picky.

“Call the Left Guardian,” Jing Shao instructed, frowning. With Junqing’s temperament, if he hadn’t been absolutely certain, he would not have said anything.

The left and right guardians were already walking over, as they’d also heard about the incident at the stables.

Noticing the grave expression on the prince’s face, Zhao Meng couldn’t help interjecting. “I’ve seen wolfsbane in the land of Shu before, but it didn’t look like this.” Wolfsbane was lethal and killed its victims painfully —who’d be so cruel as to use it on a horse?

“The variety that grows in the land of Shu is yellow-leaf wolfsbane. This one is long-leaf wolfsbane and grows on the plains,” said the Left Guardian expressionlessly. He’d always loved horses, so he’d paid more attention to the grasses that went into fodder.

Shadow neighed loudly, as if agreeing with the Left Guardian.

Jing Shao patted his big black head and said in a resonant voice, “I want an investigation!”

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TWO HOURS LATER, those who fed the horses, those who were in charge of the feed shed, and those who escorted the provisions were all brought before Jing Shao in the royal tent.

“Your Highness, I truly had nothing to do with it!” said one of the accused men, wailing and kowtowing fervently from his prostrate position on the ground.

“Your Highness, when I checked, I found a small amount of wolfsbane was mixed in with the newly delivered fodder in the feed shed,” said the Left Guardian.

“Do any of you have anything to say for yourselves?” The Right Guardian approached the group, a sharp grin on his face. “Poisoning chargers is an offense punishable by death, and if no one confesses to it, you’re all going to lose your heads.”

“Your Highness, I beg your mercy! I really had nothing to do with it!”

They all took turns explaining how this fodder came to be here. The new batch had just arrived yesterday; a place as important as the storage for provisions was always off-limits to outsiders, and the guards who escorted the delivery only handled transportation and hadn’t witnessed any

substitution of the shipment along the way. As for the stable hand, he truly was innocent. He was only responsible for feeding the horses, so he couldn't have possibly mixed poisonous herbs into all of the new fodder in the feed shed.

While each had a valid argument, every one of them had been responsible for the fodder at one point or another. The entire chain of custody for the food was right here, and it wasn't as if the poisonous herb could have flown into the feed on its own.

"Since none of them will confess to it, drag them all out and execute them!" Zhao Meng waved his hand. With this kind of incident, one needed to make an example of those responsible.

Jing Shao frowned—this probably hadn't been done by anyone in the military. The poisoner had wanted to kill all of the horses, something that had never occurred in his previous life. It was only happening now that he'd decided to stop in the capital's outskirts. However, since there was nothing untoward in any part of the fodder's transport and storage, where on earth had this wolfsbane come from?

"Wait a moment!" Mu Hanzhang, who'd been sitting and listening to all of this in silence, suddenly spoke up to stop the guards from dragging the accused away. "This matter hasn't been thoroughly investigated. We cannot kill these people just yet."

Zhao Meng just couldn't stand the way academics dragged their feet. Why bother investigating? In the military, the longer something like this dragged on, the more danger the camp was in. It was best to resolve incidents swiftly and decisively on the battlefield. If they simply eliminated all the suspects, it would leave no room for further problems to arise.

“Master Jun, military law allows for summary execution. Are you saying this to shield someone?” he asked.

It was indeed suspicious for something like this to happen as soon as this strategist joined the camp. Hearing this, everyone started looking at Mu Hanzhang differently.

“General Zhao, are you in such a hurry to kill them all because *you’re* trying to cover something up?” Mu Hanzhang asked deliberately, turning a page of the rations and feed storage records in his hand.

“Why you—” Zhao Meng choked on his words.

Mu Hanzhang closed the booklet in his hand. He had no intention of letting Zhao Meng off easily, so he continued theorizing aloud. “The camp is heavily guarded, so anyone who dared tamper with the provisions must have had someone in a high position agree to turn a blind eye.” He stared intently at General Zhao with eyes dark as black lacquer, as if he’d already seen through everything.

“You’re… This is lies and slander!” The provocation sent Zhao Meng into such a rage that his face flashed bright red, and his whole bushy beard trembled.

“Master Jun never said you were the one who did it, so why are you so worked up?” the Right Guardian chimed in, clearly enjoying the show, while the Left Guardian remained expressionless and silent.

Jing Shao pressed his fist against his lips to stifle his ill-timed laughter.

Mu Hanzhang rose, saluted Jing Shao with a cupped fist, and said, “Your Highness, this one believes that we should detain these people for now and decide what to do with them after we clarify the facts of this incident.”

“If you think you’ve got what it takes, you investigate it!” Zhao Meng said, pointing at Mu Hanzhang.

Mu Hanzhang smiled slightly. “I’ll do just that.”

“Then let’s set a deadline!”

“Three days.”

“Fine! After three days, if you haven’t figured out what happened, you’ll be deemed an accomplice!” Zhao Meng yelled, so driven to rage by Mu Hanzhang’s indifferent attitude that he was unable to control his voice.

“I have no objections, so long as you don’t interfere, General Zhao.” Mu Hanzhang’s tone remained unchanged, as gentle and calm as ever, but it was far more persuasive than General Zhao’s shouting.

“Hmph! I’m going to go squat in the stockade right next to them!” Zhao Meng was so angry that he was practically jumping up and down. Even if he didn’t like it, he wasn’t about to interfere in an investigation like some petty villain. “Well then, we’ll need to write a formal military pledge!”

Mu Hanzhang glanced at him. Perhaps this General Zhao wasn’t a complete brute, after all.

He asked Yun Song to bring writing implements and wrote a military pledge in an elegantly robust hand, signing the name *Jun Qing* on the pledge. Yun Song brought it to Zhao Meng, and he took the brush, then without even reading the paper, swiftly wrote down his name with flamboyant, exaggerated brush strokes. After that, he grabbed the suspects who were still prostrated on the floor and left.

Mu Hanzhang folded the military pledge and handed it to Jing Shao.

Once only he and Jing Shao remained, the prince couldn't resist pulling his consort into his arms. Junqing had been far too dashing going head-to-head against Zhao Meng; seeing his brilliance directly was like witnessing the sacred saber, Latent Radiance, being drawn from its scabbard. It left him utterly captivated.

"Are you certain we can get to the bottom of this?"

Having been pulled onto Jing Shao's lap, Mu Hanzhang shifted awkwardly. "I have nothing more than a theory—even I'm not entirely certain of the outcome."

Jing Shao frowned. He couldn't help but worry. A military pledge wasn't an oath that could be made lightly. It would be troublesome if they ended up not finding anything.

"Zhao Meng is a hothead. Why bother sinking to his level?"

"I signed with the name you introduced me by, not with my real name—according to the laws of the Chen Empire, any military pledge not signed with one's full name is invalid," said Mu Hanzhang with a chuckle.

Jing Shao froze for a moment, swallowed, and thought to himself, *It'd be best to avoid ever getting on the wrong side of my consort's anger.*

Mu Hanzhang passed on instructions to keep news of the investigation under wraps, then asked for the field camp's ledgers and studied them with intense scrutiny.

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In the evening, Jing Shao returned from drills, and after a bath, he dropped in on Mu Hanzhang. He was sitting at the desk in their tent, a large stack of ledgers beside him, quietly working his way through them one by one under candlelight. Jing Shao casually rifled through the pile; aside from the ones on fodder, there were also ledgers detailing the weapons, uniforms, tents, and personnel transfers.

"Why are you looking at these?" Jing Shao asked, confused. "Aren't you supposed to be investigating the poisoned feed?"

"I've been wanting to take a look at the military's ledger, and this just happened to give me the perfect opportunity, so I took everything," Mu Hanzhang said as he flipped a page, picked up a brush, and wrote down a short note on a nearby sheet of paper.

"But these other ledgers aren't pressing. You can browse them any time you want." Saying this, he plucked Mu Hanzhang from his chair and scooped him into a bridal carry. "Besides, it's too late in the day. You can read some more tomorrow."

"Let me finish reading this one!" Mu Hanzhang said, squirming in his grasp.

"Not possible. This Prince is tired. Our strategist must perform his bedchamber duties!" Jing Shao threw Mu Hanzhang onto their spacious bed and pounced upon him.

His pressing weight made it rather hard for Mu Hanzhang to breathe, so he reached out to begin pushing him away.

Suddenly, footsteps sounded from beyond the tent, and Mu Hanzhang wrapped his outstretched arms around Jing Shao to still his movements. As he

did so, he remembered the candles inside with them; their shadows were being cast onto the tent walls for all to see!

Mu Hanzhang had trapped Jing Shao against his chest, and though it was through a thin layer of summer fabric, Jing Shao's chin just so happened to rest upon a slightly protruding nipple—so he rubbed his chin back and forth on top of it.

Mu Hanzhang let out a soft hum, then glared at him before blowing out the candle next to the bed.

"Junqing, you're…"

Jing Shao's eyes widened; he was surprised at how forward his consort was being today. Dousing the lights was a clear act of seduction! And so, he quickly stripped himself of his outer robe and sought out those soft lips, pressing his own against them.

This kiss took Mu Hanzhang by surprise, and he attempted to push away his reckless husband. Unfortunately, his feeble resistance appeared to Jing Shao as coy encouragement. Emboldened, Jing Shao reached under the collar of his underrobe and began to caress his supple chest.

A shiver ran over Mu Hanzhang under his ministrations, and a grunt followed, low in his throat. But as Jing Shao's hand reached for the last layer of cloth, Mu Hanzhang could take no more, and, bracing one raised knee against Jing Shao's abdomen, he shoved the man off of him.

"Junqing…" Jing Shao sulkily tried to climb back on.

"The candles inside the tent haven't been put out yet, so everything is visible from outside." Mu Hanzhang frowned and pointed at the yellow

copper candlestick behind the desk. The eight candles set into it crackled as they burned.

Jing Shao sprang off the bed and blew out the candles in a single breath before burrowing back under the covers, wrapping Mu Hanzhang in his arms.

“Your Highness, did you forget what you said the day before yesterday?” Mu Hanzhang pulled the quilt over them both. “We must conserve our energy, and we need to get up early tomorrow. So, let’s get some sleep.” His gentle voice laid it all out with perfect logic, the sound of a loyal subject giving earnest advice.

“Junqing…”

As soon as Mu Hanzhang mentioned “the day before yesterday,” Jing Shao deflated. He gently rocked the man in his arms, but unfortunately, Junqing just buried his face in Jing Shao’s chest, quiet and with his eyes closed, as if he’d already fallen asleep.

Jing Shao had assumed that if he pretended nothing was wrong, everything would blow over after one day. He’d never imagined that his consort was the type to hold a grudge! Jing Shao could only pull Mu Hanzhang tighter into his embrace and…go to sleep!

Chapter 43:
The Truth

THE THREE-DAY DEADLINE was quickly approaching, yet Mu Hanzhang seemed not the least bit concerned. All he did was read through the ledgers every day inside the royal tent and check on the camp every so often.

"What did Master Jun ask you about today?" the Right Guardian asked a young soldier he caught while hurrying back to eat, rather curious as to how Master Jun was going to find this culprit within three days.

"He asked me when our uniforms were issued and how often we get to eat meat," the soldier replied truthfully.

"Military uniforms? Meat?" The Right Guardian couldn't make heads or tails of it. What did this have to do with poisonous herbs?

After releasing this young soldier, he caught another one.

"Master Jun asked me how often I sent letters home and who scribed them for me," said the tall young soldier, smiling good-naturedly. "He also said that because I gave him a good answer, I could ask him to write my letters from now on." This was His Highness's own strategist, right? His handwriting would definitely be better than that of the county graduate from his village. This way, his mother would be able to show it off to the other villagers.

Hearing this confused the Right Guardian even more. What on earth was going on here?! Refusing to let it go, he stopped several more men, but all he heard from them were more unrelated questions—petty gossip and kitchen-table talk that seemed utterly irrelevant to the case at hand.

The Left Guardian stepped up and patted the distracted Right Guardian on the shoulder. “Time to eat.”

“Hey, what do you think the strategist is trying to investigate, exactly?” the Right Guardian asked dolefully.

The Left Guardian turned and left, expressionless. “I’m going to eat.”

“Hey, hey, wait for me!” The Right Guardian hurriedly chased after him. Their meals were served together, so if he got there late that guy would eat it all!

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THREE DAYS PASSED in the blink of an eye. Zhao Meng came out of the stockade first thing in the morning and went to the command pavilion, waiting for this so-called “strategist” to make a fool of himself. He was self-aware enough to know he couldn’t out-argue a scholar, so he brought along the left and right guardians as well as several of the commandants.

The command pavilion was where generals discussed tactics and issued military orders. It was similar in size to Jing Shao’s tent, but it had no bed taking up the room. Jing Shao sat atop a high platform and looked down at the bunch of fierce-looking men below; he shot Zhao Meng a sympathetic glance.

Mu Hanzhang sat on the chair next to Jing Shao, holding a black goose-feather fan. In every history book, each strategist worth their salt owned one, after all. It was actually a gift the Right Guardian had given him

yesterday in an attempt to find out what might happen in advance of today's reveal.

"Master Yun, the deadline of three days has come, and I, Old Zhao, am here to listen to your insights," said Zhao Meng gruffly. He was standing in the center of the tent next to the suspects he'd retrieved from their shared prison cell.

"General, you're so impatient." Mu Hanzhang fanned himself with the fan a couple of times as he regarded the scruffy, bearded man below with quiet detachment.

Zhao Meng really had squatted in the stockade for three whole days. Even though the guards had given him ample rations and drink, General Zhao was still looking rather the worse for wear without washing up for that time. When compared to the white-robed Mu Hanzhang who seemed utterly untouched by dust, his appearance was jarring.

After getting a once-over with that look of mild disdain, even General Zhao, who wasn't usually particular about his appearance, felt self-conscious. He wiped his face with a hand and said, angered, "Enough with the yapping. We both signed a military pledge, so tell us already—who exactly is the culprit?"

The corners of Mu Hanzhang's lips turned up, and he slowly pointed his folded fan at those kneeling below the platform. "They all are, and also none of them are."

"What do you mean by that?" Zhao Meng asked, confounded.

The junior officers also looked visibly confused; the infantry commandant quietly asked the Right Guardian if he'd found out anything yesterday and was met with a gloomy expression on the Right Guardian's

face. Yesterday, Master Jun had talked circles around him for ages, telling him nothing, and had even confiscated his feather fan "bribe."

"When I say none of them are, it is because they were not the ones who put the wolfsbane in the fodder. There was already wolfsbane in the fodder before the escort officer received it."

Mu Hanzhang waved the fan a couple of times, satisfied at the sudden change in the expressions of those below. There was no way he could impress these brutes by being straightforward. However, if he was intentionally vague and cryptic, they would instead think more highly of him.

"Bless your infinite wisdom, Master Jun!" the stable hand shouted before the others could and happily kowtowed to Mu Hanzhang. He'd been scared stiff ever since His Highness's horse had gone berserk. With what the strategist just said, he'd at least be able to keep his head.

The remaining few quickly chimed in affirmatively once they realized the implications in Mu Hanzhang's words.

"However," Mu Hanzhang said, and he paused before continuing, "the poisonous feed was transported under escort all the way into the army's feed shed, and it was subsequently taken out to feed the horses. No one in its chain of custody discovered the wolfsbane. Therefore, they cannot escape punishment."

The accused simultaneously broke out in a sweat and breathed a sigh of relief. As the saying went, while capital punishment might be avoided, punishment was inevitable. Nothing else mattered so long as they could be spared from execution.

"Does that mean the vendor who sold the grass to us mistakenly cut wolfsbane into the feed?" interjected the Right Guardian.

Zhao Meng recalled what the Left Guardian said about wolfsbane, clearly unconvinced by Mu Hanzhang's argument. "Long-leaf wolfsbane grows on the northwestern grasslands. How would they manage to harvest it in the capital's outskirts?"

Mu Hanzhang shook his head. "It was not an accident. Someone deliberately intended to poison the chargers by adding it to the feed."

"The army hasn't even set off yet, so if our chargers are poisoned, we'd just buy more. It wouldn't affect the outcome of the war at all. Who in their right mind would do something so cruel without cause?" Zhao Meng demanded, clearly of the belief that the strategist was spouting a load of rubbish.

"As for that, you'll have to ask the military clerks who keep the accounts for this field camp." Mu Hanzhang picked up the teacup from the table and took a sip.

"The clerks?" Jing Shao, who had been sitting next to him listening attentively, couldn't help but ask. After he'd pestered him for ages last night, not only had Junqing not told him the truth of the matter, he'd also denied Jing Shao further intimacies, leaving him anxious *and* frustrated all night long.

In a military camp, a clerk was responsible for registering expenditures in the ledgers, writing deployment orders, and managing correspondence, as well as other miscellaneous clerical duties. Most things were kept simple and no-frills in the army, and in a camp of five thousand, there were a total of four clerks, mostly forgotten aside from when letters or deployment orders needed to be written.

Mu Hanzhang nodded and said to Jing Shao, “I read through all of the ledgers for this military camp. Let’s not speak of the past for now—just for this one campaign, we’re short almost three-tenths of the funds allocated by the Ministry of Revenue for provisions. Moreover, what was recorded in the accounts is also far different from the actual expenditure.”

“What?!” Jing Shao started, sitting up ramrod straight.

Mu Hanzhang produced some of the line items he’d copied to present to Jing Shao. The ledgers showed that the soldiers had all been allocated three sets of uniforms per season, but in reality, they’d only received two. The daily food according to the ledgers contained at least one meal with meat in it per day, but in reality, they only got meat once every week, and most of the time they were only served rice porridge and steamed buns.

When the military officers below the platform heard this, their faces grew grave as well. The Right Guardian couldn’t help asking, “If what Master Jun said is true, what does this falsification of the ledgers by the clerks have to do with the poisonous herbs?”

Mu Hanzhang slowly stroked the handle of the goose-feather fan. “As per custom, before the army goes on the march, the Ministry of Revenue audits the accounts.”

He explained that, whilst everything else was negotiable, three-tenths of the money being unaccounted for was no small sum and would raise red flags. However, the mass death of their chargers would require immediate replacement, resulting in Prince Cheng reporting this loss to the imperial court. He would then be allocated a great sum of silver to procure more horses. Then, with some creative accounting, the clerks could offset the discrepancies in the accounts.

As for their choice of poison, when livestock were poisoned with wolfsbane, the symptoms were paralysis, fever, and foaming at the mouth, which was quite similar to the horse plague. As soon as a diagnosis of horse plague was suspected, their carcasses would be burned and buried, and no one would examine them carefully afterward.

Once Mu Hanzhang finished his assessment of the situation, a hush fell over the entire command pavilion.

"What a vicious scheme…" the Left Guardian said, each word deliberate and paced apart.

"But these clerks were appointed by the Ministry of Revenue to begin with," said the Right Guardian with a frown.

Was the Ministry of Revenue planning to drop a rock on their own foot? A few minor clerks would never have the guts to commit such an audacious crime; there had to be high-ranking officials covering up for them. No matter how you looked at it, this seemed like embezzlement by the Ministry of Revenue themselves.

"The Ministry of Revenue is not entirely of one mind," Mu Hanzhang said, sighing. He wondered who would be sent to audit the books; this person, at the very least, was not in cahoots with the previous embezzlers. This was probably why they had been forced into enacting such a desperate plan.

Jing Shao's hand slowly balled into a fist. The hardships of military life were common knowledge; when he'd campaigned against the Xiongnu, the food had been pretty much the same as what he was served now, so he'd never thought there was anything wrong. He now finally understood how the minister of revenue had managed to file a formal complaint against him for

embezzling military funds in his previous life—he wasn't the one that embezzled the funds. Instead, the Ministry of Revenue had allocated extra funds to him, then made this money vanish without his knowledge!

"Bring all of those clerks here!" Zhao Meng fumed with rage, and before long, four frail clerks were brought into the tent, trembling as they fell to their knees.

Faced with such grave accusations, the clerks, of course, refused to confess. Empowered by their belief that because they were court officials, the army could not use corporal punishment against them, they just kept making excuses.

Zhao Meng, however, didn't concern himself with such rules, and he swiftly kicked the one nearest him. "My food's been awful every single day—just to fill you cowards' coin purses, huh?!"

The clerk he kicked folded forward, vomit and bile spewing from his mouth.

Jing Shao hurled the ledgers at their faces and said coldly, "You're just minor clerks, and yet you're acting like you're high-ranking mandated officials of the court?! Even if This Prince were to flay you all alive today, no one in the government would think I did anything wrong!"

This statement may not have been entirely accurate, but Prince Cheng was infamous for his ruthlessness. The Right Guardian sneered and told them that since they were with the army now, everything they did should be handled according to military law.

The clerks had already spent the past few days in a state of panic, and now the situation seemed irreparable. The one Zhao Meng had kicked clawed his way back onto his knees and was the first to confess; the other three had

little choice but to buckle under the pressure. They were merely underlings, and the only thing they were aware of was that their immediate superior was a vice director in the Ministry of Revenue. That was where their knowledge began and ended.

"This is beyond outrageous!" Jing Shao stood up, ready to drag these four to the capital.

Mu Hanzhang quickly reeled him back, sending him a look that urged patience. "This matter is of great importance and warrants careful consideration."

Jing Shao took a deep breath. "First, detain these four. The rest of you may go. This Prince will deliberate over this matter with the strategist before making a final decision."

The Left Guardian personally escorted the four individuals to the stockade, and Zhao Meng tried to add something more, but he was dragged away by the Right Guardian before he could.

"Junqing, what did you want to say?" Jing Shao took a sip of his tea. There was no way he would let today's matter rest. Even if it delayed the expedition, he had to uncover the culprits behind this scheme!

Mu Hanzhang breathed out a light sigh. "You're only going to alert the enemy if you bring them before the palace today. In order to appease you and expedite your departure, Father would also hastily wrap up the case."

Everything he said was true, but what had happened today had already gone beyond what Jing Shao could tolerate. Not only did Mu Hanzhang's words fail to calm him, they instead ignited the flames of fury in his heart. He swept the cups and saucers off the table before him, and they crashed to the floor.

With anger in his eyes, he turned to Mu Hanzhang. “Then what should I do? Are you saying that I should take this lying down?”

Pressing his lips together, Mu Hanzhang remained silent. Even though he knew Jing Shao’s anger wasn’t directed toward him, the expression in those eyes still pained him. On their wedding night, those eyes had looked at him in just the same way…

Chapter 44:
Topless

JING SHAO WAITED for a long while, but Junqing still said nothing, quietly averting his gaze. Oddly, this moment of silence somehow calmed him, and he suddenly realized that he had spoken too harshly earlier.

"I never said you should take this lying down," Mu Hanzhang murmured, his hands clasped tightly on his lap, unaware that his goose-feather fan had fallen to the floor. "This matter still needs— Hmm?"

Jing Shao felt such a pang in his heart at Mu Hanzhang's reaction that he could barely stand it. He approached the other man and took those clenched hands—his grip so tight that his knuckles had turned white—into his own. When Mu Hanzhang raised his head in confusion, Jing Shao reached out and brushed a hand down his cheek.

"I'm not angry with you." How could he have forgotten how sensitive his Junqing was? Jing Shao crouched down to look up at him. "Junqing…"

When Mu Hanzhang turned his face down and met Jing Shao's eyes, full of tender concern for him, the slight bitterness in his heart suddenly turned sweet and sour. He found himself smiling and slowly leaned over to press a kiss on a beautiful eyelid.

"You're my husband, so losing your temper with me is your right. However, since you seem to think you shouldn't have done so, you'll be punished if you ever do it again."

"As you say." Having received a kiss Mu Hanzhang initiated himself, Jing Shao was filled with such immeasurable joy that he would have agreed

to whatever his consort asked.

"How shall I punish you?" Mu Hanzhang's beautiful eyes crinkled. "You'll have to spend three nights sleeping in the study. How about that?"

"How could you?" Jing Shao immediately protested. He rested his head on his consort's thigh, wrapped his arms around that slender waist, and gave it a little shake. "When couples argue, they always reconcile at the foot of the bed. Do you know why that is?"

"Why is that?" Mu Hanzhang's lips curved as he let Jing Shao sway him back and forth.

"Because as they roll from one end of the bed to the other in a night of passion, once they've fully enjoyed themselves, of course they'd make up," said Jing Shao without an ounce of shame.

"There you go again, more nonsense!" Mu Hanzhang's fair and handsome face flushed slightly red as he nudged Jing Shao. "Getting back to serious matters, this isn't an incident you can handle on your own. And besides, with the expedition imminent, you don't have the energy to spare. It's best to hand this matter over to Prince Rui."

Since the second prince had recently undergone the ceremony to receive his title, it was proper to address him as Prince Rui.

"Hand it over to Brother?" Jing Shao straightened up and closed his eyes to think.

All this scheming and politicking of the imperial court really did try his patience, and he had no wish to get involved. This incident involved the Ministry of Revenue, and if he went to Father about it, in the best-case scenario, Father would simply behead the ones responsible. But his brother

had extensive connections in the court, and letting him handle it might result in more than just that.

"To begin with, we're in the right, so naturally we should take this opportunity to get something out of it." Mu Hanzhang's lips quirked, and he picked up the goose-feather fan from the floor, fanning Jing Shao with it. It was the Seventh Month, and the weather was still so sweltering that Jing Shao had already worked up a sweat.

"You're right. I'll head over to Brother's residence in a bit," Jing Shao said, and enjoying the breeze from the fan, he laid his head back down in Mu Hanzhang's lap again.

"Take these ledgers, along with the notes I copied. Should you find anyone at court particularly troublesome, you should tell your brother about them as well." Mu Hanzhang gave this some thought and added, "Remember to do it out of earshot of Prince Rui's advisors."

"His advisors?" Jing Shao looked up.

He was familiar with the scholars who resided in the Prince Rui Estate; they were always courteous enough whenever he saw them. Moreover, many of his and his brother's less honorable schemes relied on their planning. They'd really contributed quite a lot to Jing Shao and Jing Chen's goals. Why did he and his brother have to hide this from them?

Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together, remembering the hostility he'd witnessed that day at the second prince's estate from those who hadn't managed to conceal it in time. "Should Brother inherit the throne, those people must be eliminated; otherwise, things will not end well for you."

Jing Shao frowned, the meaning behind his consort's words becoming clear. Intelligent people tended to consider every worst-case scenario, and

those individuals had probably already advised his brother to remain guarded against him.

Grateful that he hadn't run off to see his father in the heat of the moment, Jing Shao stood up and pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms. He'd already sworn in his past life that if he survived, he would do everything Mu Hanzhang asked of him. Even though the present Junqing was unaware of this, his promise still held true, and it was also for Jing Shao's own good. After all, even though he was living his life over again, he was still unskilled at all that scheming and intrigue.

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SINCE BRINGING ALONG four clerks would have been too conspicuous, Jing Shao mounted Shadow and headed to the capital alone.

Watching Jing Shao's figure fade into the distance, Mu Hanzhang quietly told himself that he should try to extend more trust to him. He returned to the royal tent to retrieve the pledge he'd signed a few days prior—his work wasn't over yet!

The left and right guardians were discussing the recent incident with General Zhao, who had just bathed and changed into fresh clothes. The Right Guardian was animatedly talking about how he'd be able to eat meat every day from now on, and when he saw Mu Hanzhang standing outside the tent, he stopped speaking immediately and respectfully called out to him.

"Master Jun!"

Because of how hot it was and how little the men cared about anyone seeing them naked, the tent flap was always wide open. Those inside had noticed Mu Hanzhang the moment he approached the tent.

As Mu Hanzhang walked in, Zhao Meng stood up self-consciously. “Do you need something, Master Jun?”

Mu Hanzhang strolled over and produced the written pledge from his sleeve. “Do you still remember this, General?”

When the three saw what Mu Hanzhang held, their expressions immediately took a grim turn. At the time, Zhao Meng had said that the loser would share the same fate as those accused. While they hadn’t been killed, those individuals had each been given twenty strikes with a military cudgel. Now that Zhao Meng thought about it, when the strategist had specifically emphasized in the command pavilion that punishment was inevitable, he had clearly been keeping this in mind.

“I always keep my word. A bet is a bet!” he said as he stripped himself of his protective bronze armor, ready to head to the punishment square.

The Right Guardian immediately stepped in to mediate. “Master Jun, General Zhao was just being hotheaded and impulsive. Please don’t hold it against him.”

With the march imminent, if General Zhao were to be punished like this, it would surely prolong their journey, and given his temperament, he would insist on riding despite any injuries he might sustain. By the time they reached Xinan, he might even end up unfit for battle.

Mu Hanzhang looked at the Right Guardian and gave him a derisive chuckle. “May I ask, Guardian, if I had been the one that lost today, would

you still consider this military pledge to be a ‘hotheaded’ moment?”

The Right Guardian immediately choked. Though their strategist enjoyed His Highness’s protection, if he had failed to find the true culprit, Zhao Meng would never have let it go so easily—not with his relentless nature. It truly disgraced these military officers to pick on a frail scholar like Master Jun.

“You don’t need to say more. I, Zhao Meng, am a man who stands tall, and I will take full responsibility!” General Zhao pushed the guardians aside and slapped himself on the chest.

“Wonderful!” Mu Hanzhang handed the military pledge to Zhao Meng. “General, you are without a doubt a man of true valor. Will you do whatever’s written on the pledge?”

“Well, naturally.” Zhao Meng snatched the paper out of his hands and looked down to read it. “Even if it costs me my head…” Zhao Meng’s voice stopped abruptly as his eyes widened at the words on the sheet of paper.

Beside himself with curiosity, the Right Guardian leaned in to read as well; in stark black ink, the words stood out on the white paper: *If the strategist is unable to find the truth, he will share the same fate as the suspects. But if he succeeds, then Zhao Meng is to take off his shirt and run topless around the entire field camp…*

“Um…” said the Right Guardian, dumbstruck.

To Zhao Meng, who’d always been stubborn and unrefined, this didn’t even count as a punishment. This was nothing more than a joke. But for the strategist, the punishment written here was unequivocal.

Zhao Meng stood there stunned for a long moment, then he suddenly got on one knee, cupped a fist in one hand, and said: “Master Jun is a true gentleman. Please accept this courtesy of a kowtow from me!”

“General, you mustn’t!” Mu Hanzhang quickly stepped forward to stop him. “I am but a strategist in name only. How could I accept this from a general? We both serve His Highness, and all I hope is that we can get along harmoniously.”

“With your abilities, you could be a strategist general!” As he said this, Zhao Meng gave him a shallow bow anyway. Then, once he got up, he stripped himself of his short robe, and to indicate that he didn’t care about going shirtless, he took off his underrobe without being prompted. He was left with just a pair of short pants when he ran out of the tent on bare feet.

On this day, every soldier in camp saw their lord general running a lap around the field camp in sloppy attire—no, barely even dressed.

An officer tending the fire halted mid-action, wood in hand, a soldier carrying a meal dropped a basket of buns, men practicing swordplay lost their grip on the hilts of their blades, and the moves a group practicing hand-to-hand combat slipped from their minds.

One by one, each individual of the army gaped in astonishment as the general, wearing only a pair of shorts, solemnly whizzed past them.

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WHEN JING CHEN HEARD the full story from Jing Shao, he stayed quiet and ruminated on it for a long time. “Did you know who they assigned

as the auditor before this expedition?"

"Who?" Jing Shao was utterly unaware of the factions within the Ministry of Revenue.

"Xiao Yuan!" Jing Chen flipped through the list of Ministry of Revenue personnel and pointed at the name of its vice minister.

Most people at court knew that Xiao Yuan and Jing Shao were on good terms. When the ministry decided to send him, it naturally threw some people into a panic.

"Well, then this is actually a good thing," Jing Shao said, and as he reflected on the minister of revenue who'd impeached him in his previous lifetime, an idea came to him. "Why don't we take this opportunity to bring down the minister of revenue?"

"The minister of revenue has been loyal to Father since his early years, and it might not be so easy to move against him." Jing Shao frowned while Jing Chen continued. "But with this matter coming to light, he cannot avoid being implicated. Give me some time to consider it."

Jing Shao nodded. Xiao Yuan was a reliable man, and they really had hit it off. In his past life, Xiao Yuan had never been promoted, not only because he was content with his lot but also because his superior had remained in his position. And now, before anything that had happened in his past life could happen again, Jing Shao aimed to defang the venomous vipers who had once done him harm!

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JUST BEFORE JING SHAO left his brother, he suddenly turned back, and after faltering for a moment, he finally said, “Brother, your advisors don’t seem to think very highly of me.”

“They tend to overthink, so they naturally assume the worst of everyone.” Jing Chen paused in surprise. When had his little brother gotten perceptive enough to see through those calculating people? But then he understood—this was perhaps something Jing Shao had honed on the battlefield, making him more sensitive to hostility and malice than most.

He patted Jing Shao on the head and whispered, “Don’t mind them. None of these people will live to see the dust settle after our great endeavor is complete.”

These resident scholars were only good at underhanded methods, and once he ascended to the throne, such opportunistic tricks would have no use in the governance of the empire. Therefore, a resident scholar would remain one for life and could never be promoted to a high official. And besides, they knew too much. No matter what, Jing Chen would never keep them around.

Jing Shao nodded. He could report this back to his princely consort.

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BY THE TIME JING SHAO got back to camp, the jade rabbit constellation had already risen in the east. The surrounding forest was silent and deserted, and the camp alone was the only thing lit, ablaze with

torchlight. The first thing he did was to rush to his tent to meet with his consort.

He found the tent dark and his consort absent.

“Where is Master Jun?” Jing Shao asked the guard outside his tent.

“To reply to Your Highness, the strategist and the generals are drinking in the command pavilion,” said the guard.

“He’s drinking?!” Jing Shao’s eyes widened; he was unable to imagine Junqing playing Morra and drinking with that bunch, carousing bare-chested with their arms around each other. Leaving the guard behind, he spun on his heel and rushed toward the command pavilion.

Chapter 45:
Intoxicated

THE COMMAND PAVILION glowed with lamplight and echoed with chatter, interlaced with the shouts from finger-guessing games and the voices of men yelling. The more Jing Shao heard on his approach, the more uneasy he felt, and in one swift motion, he pulled open the tent flap.

Several commandants were sitting every which way on one side of the tent, clearly already drunk, and still engaged in a game of Morra. The cavalry commandant had his arm around the infantry commandant, who was yammering away.

The Right Guardian was hanging off the Left Guardian, lamenting, "All I did was give Two-Dog a good beating is all. Why, that damn shrew actually slapped me. I was only seven…" The Left Guardian, pinned in place, listened to his grumbling expressionlessly while slowly sipping from the wine bowl in his hand, letting the Right Guardian smear his tears and snot on him.

Zhao Meng was eagerly recounting to Mu Hanzhang an embarrassing incident involving Prince Cheng during his time in the desert.

"His Highness fell off his horse, you see, and it just so happened that there was a rock sticking out of that particular sand dune, and it cut his pants wide open! His Highness didn't have time to worry about them, and he chopped off that man's head, just like that!" When he got to the exciting part of the tale, the topless General Zhao couldn't help slinging an arm around Mu

Hanzhang's shoulders and laughing, speaking in a voice that only he thought was quiet.

"Just a tiny bit closer, and he would've lost his manhood! When His Majesty made His Highness take a man for a wife, we even speculated whether he actually did get hurt down there!" He ended the whole story with a chuckle.

It was this scene that Jing Shao was met with the moment he stepped into the tent, tilting him into a rage. He dashed over and punched Zhao Meng to the floor before pulling his consort up from his seat.

"Your Highness, you should come join us!" Zhao Meng, being quite drunk, was entirely numb to the pain and lay on the floor smiling up at Jing Shao.

"He just overdrank, that's all. Why are you taking it so seriously?" Mu Hanzhang's cheeks were slightly flushed, but his eyes were clear; he evidently hadn't partaken as much.

"He dared take liberties with you. How could I let him get away with that?" Jing Shao, still angry, gave the man on the floor a couple more kicks.

"There you go again!" Mu Hanzhang glared at him. Was putting an arm around each other considered "taking liberties" among men? After he spoke, he looked around and sighed, turned around, and started to walk outside. "Well, looks like I finally got them all drunk, so let's go back."

The drinking capacity of these military men was really something. Even with his eloquent persuasion to keep them going, it had taken this long to get them all to pass out.

Jing Shao laughed softly at his words; they'd been trying to get the strategist drunk, but he'd ended up getting the last laugh. He was about to pull on his consort's sleeve when he noticed that Mu Hanzhang's steps were unsteady, and he almost fell over after tripping on Zhao Meng.

He reached out to pull Mu Hanzhang into his embrace at once. "Junqing, have you had too much?"

"Just a few cups, that's all." Mu Hanzhang rubbed at his temple, feeling dizzy, and he rested his head on Jing Shao's shoulder. He muttered, "The wine here is a little strong…"

His murmuring, lilting voice was scented sweetly with wine as it tickled Jing Shao's ear; Jing Shao suddenly felt as though a cat's paw had just clawed softly over his heart, an unbearable itch he could not scratch. As he looked around, he found the room occupied by nothing but drunkards, likely not paying him any attention, and so he picked up his consort in a bridal carry and headed for the door.

As he passed Zhao Meng, he couldn't help kicking him once more. Only then did he step out of the tent, walking off into the distance.

Seated in the corner, drinking silently, the Left Guardian stared at Prince Cheng's receding back, his hand paused in the middle of raising the wine bowl to his lips.

"Say, Leftie, how could she hit me like that? That wicked woman…" The Right Guardian slid onto the Left Guardian's lap, still whining away.

The Left Guardian quietly put down his bowl, hoisted the Right Guardian onto his shoulder, and walked out of the command pavilion, leaving behind a pile of drunken men snoring thunderously on the floor behind him.

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"JUNQING," JING SHAO SAID as he carried the man in his arms to the bed. "Would you like me to give you a bath?"

"I can bathe myself." Mu Hanzhang still appeared quite lucid and conducted his speech and actions with a calm demeanor, but Jing Shao knew that he was absolutely plastered.

He reached out, untied the sash of Mu Hanzhang's outer garment, then removed a snow-white gossamer layer before checking his expression; Mu Hanzhang still looked as calm and staid as ever. Jing Shao found it rather amusing and pressed a kiss to those flushed cheeks. The only wine they had in the army was strong spirits with a powerful kick, and Mu Hanzhang's tolerance for alcohol was average at best. Even though he'd only had a few cups, now that the alcohol was kicking in, his head must have been incredibly foggy.

"Stop it." Mu Hanzhang gave Jing Shao a little shove. His mind was still clear, but he had trouble controlling his body's movements, so when his hand landed on Jing Shao's chest to shove him, it slid down it instead.

This gesture came off almost like a seductive caress and sent a tightness through Jing Shao's loins; he quickly stripped Mu Hanzhang of his clothes and carried him into the bathing tub in the middle of the tent.

Since Junqing was shy, he never agreed to share a bath unless he was too exhausted from their intense lovemaking. Jing Shao had never seen him so compliant. He grabbed the shampoo to wash his hair, then pulled Mu

Hanzhang back against his chest so that he could gently massage the soft, silky strands, finding this activity both novel and interesting.

With those big, lightly calloused hands rubbing his scalp, Mu Hanzhang felt his throbbing headache starting to ease. Drowsy, he let his eyes drift closed.

Once he'd finished washing Mu Hanzhang's hair, Jing Shao took a towel and scrubbed him down. The towel glided over that smooth, supple chest, slowly tracing the contours of his muscles. After hearing what the medical director had said that day, Jing Shao finally understood that Junqing had likely deliberately trained his body. Otherwise, with his damaged meridians, he would have long since become a sickly invalid by now. That was why he had these beautiful muscles—though they were not very prominent and well-defined. He also often emphasized that he was in excellent health.

The body in his arms was slender and beautiful, with luminous skin that had never been weathered by the sun and wind, as smooth and lustrous as jade. As he shifted, two cherry-red buds occasionally emerged from the water, then dipped back beneath the surface. The towel had slipped from Jing Shao's hand at some point without his knowledge, and before he knew it, his hand was already starting to caress the enticing jut of Mu Hanzhang's collarbone.

"What are you doing?" Mu Hanzhang moaned and looked up at him, only to be pulled closer by a hand on the back of his neck, his lips captured.

The sweetness of strong liquor lingered on his tongue. It was hardly fine wine, but at this moment, Jing Shao thought it was more delicious than the ambrosial wine served in the palace, leaving him helplessly wanting

more. His hands slid down that gracefully sculpted back to the rounded curves below, and there, they wandered over smooth skin.

Mu Hanzhang groaned. Though he was a little drunk, he could still sense the danger he was in and tried to evade those insistently pestering hands.

Jing Shao let out a muffled groan; as the man in his arms fidgeted, his body brushed against his groin, fully awakening his ardor. He opened his mouth and gently bit the shell of one ear, heated to a scalding pink by the hot steam.

"You brought this on yourself." After dipping his fingertips into some of the fragrant hair wash, he then started feeling around below.

"Don't. I'm tired," said Mu Hanzhang. His head was clear; after the night Jing Shao had lied to him, he'd decided to shun him for several days. If he let Jing Shao have his way now, all his efforts would have been for naught! However, this lustful man simply wasn't listening to him at all.

Mu Hanzhang was about to say something else when a finger was suddenly inserted into his body, making him whimper aloud, groaning, "You bastard…"

His fair neck craned backward in a graceful curve, and the delicate jut of his throat moved up and down with every gasp. Jing Shao lowered his head to graze his teeth over it while his fingers continued to busy themselves inside Mu Hanzhang.

Once Jing Shao thought Mu Hanzhang was ready, he turned him so that they were facing each other. With both hands holding him up by the supple curves of his ass, he began to sit Mu Hanzhang onto his hardened erection.

“Ah!” Mu Hanzhang’s brows furrowed from the pain, and his head flung to the side.

“You’re not allowed to drink with those men again, got it?” Jing Shao snarled, yet his hands were careful and incredibly gentle, holding him still and carefully lowering him down in tiny increments.

“You jerk…” Mu Hanzhang slumped over Jing Shao’s shoulders, opened his mouth, and bit down.

“Look at you, you’ve learned to curse like a soldier.” There wasn’t much force behind that bite to begin with, making it feel far more like a kiss. The itch in Jing Shao’s heart grew ever more unbearable, and loosening his grip, he brought Mu Hanzhang down fully, flush against him.

“That’s not true… *Ah.* It hurts…” Mu Hanzhang wanted to refute him, yet this sudden rush of sensation made him forgot everything he was going to say.

Jing Shao kissed him on the corner of the eye, where a watery tear had gathered, and gently stroked Mu Hanzhang’s back. “Don’t worry; I won’t move. It’ll stop hurting soon.”

Mu Hanzhang slowly breathed in and out, gradually adjusting to the sudden intrusion of this giant thing. Once he’d overcome this wave of pain, a familiar prickling, tingling sensation gradually began to climb up his spine.

“Does it still hurt?” Jing Shao noticed that he’d stopped gasping and wrapped Mu Hanzhang’s arms around his neck. Then, slowly, he began to move.

The light, barely audible murmur from his throat gradually grew out of control, and for a time, the inside of the tent was drenched in a smoldering, intimate ambience. The splashing of water tangled with the soft moans emanating in that gentle voice, sending the waning moon into blushing shyness as it hid behind the clouds. Starlight twinkled in the ink-black sky, and summer wind brushed the tops of the forest, while out of a serene military tent came the occasional breathless moan, startling the birds resting on its canopy into flight.

The night was still long.

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THE NEXT DAY WHEN Mu Hanzhang awoke, he rubbed his temples, which were throbbing from a hangover. He slowly sat up. The smooth silk quilt slipped away from his body, revealing faint red marks, reminding him of what transpired the night before, leaving him rather vexed. He turned to the other side of the bed, but Jing Shao had already left, and the chants of training could be heard coming from a distance. *Damn you, Jing Shao!*

Thus, in the days that followed, His Highness, who had earned his strategist's ire by taking advantage of the situation, went right back to his life of being allowed to touch and kiss but was entirely restricted from the full course.

Just as once one had sampled the finest delicacies, it was hard to go back to plain food, now that he'd dined on a sumptuous feast full of meat and fish, how could he return to a vegetable platter and not feel miserable?

Consequently, the ever-frustrated, ever-unsatisfied Prince Cheng was left with nothing better to do than funnel these emotions into training the troops relentlessly every day, causing widespread lamentation throughout the camp.

There was also no further news from court—until seven days later, when His Majesty dispatched the vice minister of revenue, Xiao Yuan, to review the military's ledgers ahead of the scheduled audit, followed by a wave of ministers joining together to impeach the minister of revenue and several of his subordinates. Furious, the emperor ordered a thorough investigation. However, the deeper the inquiry went, the more alarming the whole case became; not only was Prince Cheng's personal army being

embezzled, it appeared the same was true of many other detachments of troops stationed near the city.

"Xiao, my friend, it's all thanks to your illustrious reputation that these people finally revealed their true colors." With a cup of wine in his hand, Jing Shao patted Vice Minister Xiao on the back.

The gesture sent Xiao Yuan staggering from its force, yet he put on a brave front and said, "It's all because Your Highness commands the army so well that you were able to discover it in time!"

The two tossed back their drinks and burst into laughter.

Sitting nearby, Mu Hanzhang watched the two exchanging compliments and felt a headache coming on. "Xiao, the people in charge of audits at the Ministry of Revenue must not have wanted you to come, so how did they end up choosing you in the end?"

This was something he'd never understood. Since they'd had the confidence to pull this off, then they must have been able to control who audited the accounts each time. Why would they allow a volatile variable like Xiao Yuan to get involved?

Xiao Yuan laughed self-deprecatingly. "Um, that… Actually, I only fought to take on this assignment because I wanted to take the opportunity to see you both off…"

Chapter 46:
Before the Expedition

ONE SMALL ACT of selfishness from the vice minister of revenue had thrown the entire court into such upheaval that it bubbled like a boiling pot of porridge. However, this disruption did not reach Jing Shao's field camp, as they were busy straightening out the logistics in preparation for the expedition; they were scheduled to march in a few days.

As the case had not yet been concluded, and the first batch of arrested officials were only minor functionaries without property to confiscate, what little money they managed to get out of them could not cover the army's underfunding. Therefore, Emperor Hongzheng allocated more funds from the imperial treasury to fill the void.

This influx meant that the field camp's account was suddenly flush with cash and needed someone to step in quickly to set things in order; however, Mu Hanzhang was only a nominal strategist and did not have the authority to manage it.

Zhao Meng proposed that Jing Shao appoint Mu Hanzhang to the post of strategist general, but Mu Hanzhang declined, stating that he had just joined the camp and was not suited for this position. In the end, a compromise was reached, and he was appointed to the post of strategist commandant. Even though he was a commandant, which allowed him to manage military affairs but not command other strategists, there were no other advisors in the field camp at the moment, making the power granted by this position sufficient for the task.

Since the Ministry of Revenue currently lacked the wherewithal to send new clerks, Mu Hanzhang promoted some of the literate soldiers to serve as clerks. In the past few days, he'd already discovered that the arrogance of the previous clerks had forced most soldiers to ask their educated peers to scribe letters on their behalf instead. At the time, he'd noted down all the names mentioned, and he had summoned them all to the command pavilion, given them a few topics to write about, and finally selected eight who could read and were capable of some accounting.

"Are you all clear on the accounts for which you're each responsible?" Mu Hanzhang asked the eight new clerks standing below the platform as he put away the ledgers.

The accounts in the military were relatively simple, so he'd chosen a method of accounting that was easy to learn yet comparatively detailed and trained them for the past day. They had to have the method down by now.

"Understood!" the eight people responded energetically.

"You're such a good teacher that even if we couldn't read, we could have learned it," said Wang Er with a smile.

Initially, when Wang Er had been serving food to the soldiers and he'd laid eyes on the strategist for the first time, he'd thought that his presence was just for show and that this man had no functional use in the army. But after just a few days, this Master Jun had already garnered quite a reputation among the troops, and he'd even transferred Wang Er to the position of clerk. If he no longer had to handle drudge work like lugging buckets of food and stoking the fire anymore, being a clerk was something he was more than willing to do.

Mu Hanzhang nodded slightly. “At the end of each ten-day period, you will hand in the ledgers for me to review. If there’s anything you don’t understand, you can ask me on that day. Otherwise, unless it’s urgent or a matter of great importance, there’s no need to come consult me—you can make your own decisions.”

At the sound of this, everyone looked visibly delighted—not only were they being spared a lot of trouble, this little bit of power they now wielded could also bring them quite a few benefits.

“However, let me make it clear that if any one of you dares embezzle military salary or chooses to conceal something important for any reason, you will be dealt with according to military law, and there will be no mercy!” Mu Hanzhang’s expression grew cold, his voice low.

“Certainly!” They immediately bowed in response, unwilling to risk their new cushy jobs. Naturally, they weren’t about to put their lives on the line for meager benefits.

Once they had left, Mu Hanzhang rubbed the center of his brow wearily. With the expedition imminent, he had a lot to deal with, and for a while they’d been without clerks, leaving the accounts messy and troublesome to manage. It had taken him the full span of yesterday to sort them out.

“Are you tired, my lord?” Yun Song asked as he came in to bring him tea. Upon seeing Mu Hanzhang so fatigued, he couldn’t help but feel a little worried.

“It doesn’t matter.” Mu Hanzhang shook his head as he handed Yun Song a sheet of paper. “Make a trip to the estate tomorrow and bring these items back here.”

“Certainly.” Yun Song tucked the note under his lapel and withdrew when he noticed that Mu Hanzhang still had other matters to attend to.

“Yun Song,” Jing Shao called out to his pageboy as he returned from drilling his men. “Go to the villa tomorrow and tell Ren Feng to bring me who I asked for.”

“Certainly,” Yun Song said, then hesitated. “But my lord had instructed me to make a trip to the residence tomorrow to fetch some things.”

“Is that so?” Jing Shao said before falling into silent consideration. “Then go ahead and fetch it. Head to the villa the day after tomorrow.”

“Certainly,” Yun Song replied, quietly making a note that to His Highness, the princely consort’s affairs clearly took precedence over His Highness’s own. With this in mind, he added, “Those newly appointed clerks have already left, and my lord seemed a little tired.”

Jing Shao’s brows furrowed briefly at this. Once he raised the tent flap and headed inside, just as he’d thought, his consort was still working away behind the desk.

“Why aren’t you done yet?” Jing Shao walked over and wrapped Mu Hanzhang into his embrace.

Mu Hanzhang tried to wriggle out of his arms. “Wait, let me finish this.”

He proceeded to write a few more lines in the booklet before putting down his brush and rubbing his sore shoulder. His gaze flicked to Jing Shao’s broad chest behind him, and he couldn’t resist the urge to lean against it.

The corners of Jing Shao’s mouth lifted. He gently ran a hand over Mu Hanzhang’s weary face, pulling him up a little in his arms so he could rest

against him more comfortably. “Haven’t you already delegated the accounts? Why are you still working?”

“Soldiers in the army send letters home every month, but these letters can be co-opted to relay intelligence. Sometimes, information can even be spread unintentionally.”

Mu Hanzhang passed a letter to him. It mentioned that the food served in the field camp near the capital had improved to the point that they even got some beef. “If the enemy got a hold of this letter, they could figure out where the camp is situated and might even be able to trace the source of some of the rarer ingredients. This poses a serious risk.”

Jing Shao nodded. Most letters sent from the army were inspected by a designated officer, but there were bound to be some oversights. Something like the mention of beef would usually be missed.

“I have written a set of procedures on how to inspect these letters and listed everything that cannot be included. Take a look, and if you think of anything else, write that down as well. Ask the scribes to make a few copies and send them to the clerks.” Mu Hanzhang handed him the newly written procedures.

Jing Shao took the document from him but didn’t read it. Instead, he focused on the man in his arms.

“What is it?” Mu Hanzhang met his gaze, confused.

“I’m wondering what on earth I did in my past life to accrue such merit, to have the privilege of spending it at your side,” Jing Shao said, looking at him without any hint of playful intent. He was seriously contemplating what he possibly could have done for the heavens to be so generous to him, to let him have this second chance.

Seeing the solemnness in his eyes, Mu Hanzhang slowly smiled. “I’m the one who should count myself deeply fortunate to have you as my partner.”

As they gazed deeply into each other’s eyes, their mutual adoration and affection reflected back at them, neither could resist drawing closer until their lips gently met.

“Master Jun!” Zhao Meng flung open the tent flap. Before he even entered, he was already calling for Mu Hanzhang.

The two men separated in a fluster; Mu Hanzhang sat up straight and pretended to be concerned with the ledger on the table, while Jing Shao glared at Zhao Meng and gritted his teeth.

“You’re here too, Your Highness!” General Zhao looked up and greeted him, casually sitting down on a chair nearby.

“General Zhao, why’d you run so fast without waiting for me?!” The Right Guardian hurried in noisily, followed by the Left Guardian with his steady, staid steps.

“Did you three come over at this time of day for any particular reason?” Mu Hanzhang put down the wolf-hair brush he was using as a prop and looked up at them.

Zhao Meng stroked his whiskers and signaled to the Right Guardian. “You tell him!”

“Oh, we were just talking among ourselves about how—you know how life in the army’s suddenly improved now?—that we should maybe buy a few things… What are you pulling on me for?” Just as the Right Guardian was getting to the good part, the Left Guardian suddenly tugged on his shirt.

“Aiya, why are you so long-winded?” Zhao Meng said, dissatisfied with his performance. “Never mind, let me do the talking. We were saying that it’s really not appropriate for our strategist to keep sharing a tent with Your Highness, so now that we have the money, we should see to it that Master Jun gets a better tent of his own.”

He assumed that since the strategist was managing the funds now, he must have felt uncomfortable suggesting spending any of the money on himself, and that was why Zhao Meng had brought the Left and Right Guardians to help talk him into it.

Alarm bells immediately started going off in Jing Shao’s head. He already wasn’t getting any even though they were sleeping in the same tent, so if they had to sleep separately, wouldn’t things only get worse? His mood, already spoiled by the interruption, turned even more foul.

He said coldly, “The strategist can’t fight. If an assassin ever showed up, wouldn’t he be completely defenseless? This Prince believes that Master Jun staying in this tent is just fine.”

“Where would you even find an assassin in a military camp? And besides, even if there are assassins, they’d be here to kill Your Highness; who’d come kill a strategist? If you ask me, I bet living in the royal tent would— Aiyoh, why are you pinching me?” The Right Guardian only got halfway through his speech when the Left Guardian pinched his waist, and he couldn’t help turning to him to grumble.

“A tent must be prepared, of course. No strategist has ever stayed in the royal tent before,” Mu Hanzhang said, and when he caught how blue Jing Shao’s face had gone with repressed distaste, he couldn’t help but smile. “However, we are going on the march in three days, and if we pitch a new

tent now, we'll have to move the other tents to make room. It's far too much trouble. Let's just file acquisitions for one once we're on the road."

Jing Shao's expression improved only after Mu Hanzhang said this. He waved a hand, dismissing the three who had nothing better to do than to give unsolicited, unwanted advice.

After everyone had left, Jing Shao embraced his consort, sulking. "Junqing, do we really have to put up a separate tent?"

"Right now, I'm your strategist, not your princely consort. If you don't want to provoke public censure, you must make sure to keep up appearances." Mu Hanzhang patted the head resting on his shoulder.

"Won't that mean we'll have to sleep separately?!" Jing Shao protested sullenly.

"Mm-hmm." Mu Hanzhang nodded, but when he saw Jing Shao making a face like he was attending a funeral, he couldn't resist pinching his cheek. "However, Your Highness could visit this one's tent in the evening to determine the current battlefield conditions."

"Of course, why didn't I think of that?" Jing Shao's eyes lit up, and he pulled Mu Hanzhang off his chair. "Come on, let's return to the royal tent to 'strategize' for a bit!"

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THE NEXT DAY, Yun Song returned to the Prince Cheng Estate and retrieved everything Mu Hanzhang had requested before coming back to the

camp.

There were quite a few items, but they were all small trinkets, so it wasn't much trouble. Curious, Jing Shao leaned in to see what he'd brought, and the first thing that drew his eyes was a xiao flute carved from green jade.

"You know how to play the flute, Junqing?" He'd never seen Mu Hanzhang play one before! Curious, Jing Shao turned the instrument over in his hand—it was an even shade of bright green, silken smooth, and sat comfortably in his hands.

"I learned when I was little. Since the zither's too heavy, it might hinder our march, but this flute is small enough to carry on me." Mu Hanzhang explained, "If we ever run out of money while on the road, we can also pawn it."

Jing Shao's hands stilled mid-fiddling with the jade flute. Weren't academics supposed to cherish their musical instruments? How come his consort was so unique…?

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THE DAY OF THE EXPEDITION arrived in the blink of an eye. First thing in the morning, the soldiers were bright-eyed and more than ready to move out. The current contingent with him were the elite team under Prince Cheng's command; the rest of the army would gradually make their way from various other parts of the empire to Xinan until they finally converged at a rally point a hundred miles from the border of the Xinan Fiefdom.

Yun Song bade farewell to Mu Hanzhang and returned to the estate, leaving Mu Hanzhang to deal with the minutiae of everyday life on his own. But to his surprise, Jing Shao brought him a handmaiden—and this handmaiden was none other than Ge Ruoyi, who'd spent several months training in concealed weapons with Nine-Blade Ghost!

Chapter 47:
The Village of Shanxia

ON LONG MARCHES, Jing Shao's elite vanguard didn't bring along siege equipment or heavy armor, but since they were made up of more than just cavalry and had to transport everyday supplies like pots and pans, they were not moving particularly fast. Due to their speed, Mu Hanzhang's carriage wasn't an impediment to their progress, always following closely behind Jing Shao's horse.

Ge Ruoyi sat quietly at the front of the carriage, ready to serve tea and water to its passenger at any given time. Whenever they took a break at High Noon, Jing Shao would go inside the carriage to take a nap. The Right Guardian was green with envy and often took the coachman's place in order to strike up a conversation with the strategist's beautiful handmaiden. But to his chagrin, Ge Ruoyi answered only one question out of every ten as a rule, so even though the Right Guardian was intensely curious about the strategist's background, he couldn't extract a single word out of her.

"She's the strategist's handmaiden. Of course she can keep secrets better than you can." The Left Guardian patted the dejected Right Guardian on the shoulder.

"Leftie, are you trying to comfort me?" The Right Guardian looked at him askance.

"Of course I am." His expression blank, the Left Guardian turned around, mounted his horse, and resumed their journey.

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AFTER TRAVELING LIKE THIS for over ten days, they arrived at the Dahang Mountains. The endless range was merely an obstacle, and they would need to take a detour through it that extended their journey by forty miles. Jing Shao ordered his troops to set up camp for now, with the intent to continue the next day.

In the command pavilion, Zhao Meng pointed at the formation diagram. “The snake formation is weak in both attack and defense. As soon as it encounters the enemy, all it can do is stand there as it takes a beating!”

“But in a forced march on a mountain path, anything other than the snake formation would slow us down!” said the Right Guardian, his stick directed at mountain terrain of the map.

Jing Shao, having just finished dinner, walked in with his strategist and encountered the two of them in such an intense argument that their faces had gone red and veins bulged from their necks.

“What are they squabbling about?” he asked the Left Guardian, who was placidly reading a strategy tome in silence.

“To answer Your Highness, they are discussing how we should navigate the mountain paths of Xinan,” said the Left Guardian.

Jing Shao immediately understood. When they’d reached the Dahang Mountains today—with all the equipment they had to carry—they’d determined that climbing over them would be more time-consuming than taking a detour, so they had chosen the latter. The Xinan region was so hilly that it made some parts of the journey impossible to bypass, forcing them to

take the mountain paths, and how they would take these paths had become a major issue.

"Master Jun, I bet *you* know—what kind of army would take mountain paths without using the snake formation?" The Right Guardian dragged Mu Hanzhang to the desk to look at the Xinan terrain map. Most of the paths were narrow, making it impossible to deploy any other formation.

"I never said we can't use a snake formation, but if the enemy has an ambush on the mountain path waiting for us, the snake will suffer devastating damage, as it would obviously just have to sit there and take it. That's why I said the vanguard should clear the way in advance!" Zhao Meng interjected with an explanation, fearing he might be misunderstood.

A furrow appeared between Jing Shao's brows. His consort had been studying the classics since childhood, so he would never have had the chance to read up on military strategy. He hadn't brought him here expecting him to be of any help on the battlefield but merely because he didn't want to be separated from him. Seeing Mu Hanzhang looking down without saying a word, Jing Shao was about to step in to offer assistance when a slender, smooth hand took hold of a wooden stick next to their simplified sand table and drew a cross in the sand.

"Master Jun, what's that?" Zhao Meng asked, staring at what Mu Hanzhang had drawn, utterly confused.

When Jing Shao saw the symbol, his eyes suddenly widened.

"This formation is called the offensive-yoke," Mu Hanzhang said slowly, pointing at the four points of the cross with the stick. "Soldiers stand at the four corners while advancing in a snake formation, with the front, left,

and right all being forward positions, making it suitable for both offense and defense."

The Right Guardian stared at it in a daze for a moment before he broke out into applause. "Wonderful, wonderful!"

Zhao Meng excitedly circled around the cross, scrutinizing it closely. "Master Jun is highly learned, indeed. I'm impressed!"

Mu Hanzhang only smiled.

"I always told you guys that you should read more, but nobody ever listens," Jing Shao said despite being stunned, pretending that Mu Hanzhang's knowledge was a matter of course.

While Jing Shao was aware of this offensive-yoke formation, it wasn't something that would be mentioned in any ordinary strategy tome. So how had Mu Hanzhang, who'd never studied strategy, learned about it?

He pulled his strategist over to him. "There is something Master Jun and I must take care of tomorrow, so you can all go ahead without us. We'll catch up in a few days."

"Your Highness, what are you going off to do?" Zhao Meng's gaze was disapproving; it wasn't a good look for a commander to leave during a march.

"It's something very important to our Xinan campaign. Keep an eye on things while we're gone, and don't cause any trouble," Jing Shao joked, clearly unwilling to divulge more, and the others tactfully kept their mouths shut.

Mu Hanzhang only voiced his puzzlement once they'd left the command pavilion. "Where are we going tomorrow?"

“To find a secret weapon.” Jing Shao’s lips curved into a mysterious smile.

Mu Hanzhang shot him a look, then headed toward his own tent. His Highness very dutifully trailed behind him.

“Why are you following me in here again?” Mu Hanzhang said with an air of resignation as he looked at the man who’d now sprawled over his bed.

Ever since the strategist’s tent had been pitched next to the royal tent, this man hadn’t slept in his own tent even once. At first, he’d put effort into sneaking over in the middle of the night, but now he just shamelessly hung out in here all the time.

“I’ll head back over there in a little while.” Jing Shao took hold of Mu Hanzhang’s hand and pulled him into his lap. “I really do have a serious question to ask you.”

Mu Hanzhang rolled his eyes. Who else would discuss serious matters by holding their strategist in their arms?

Seeing that expression on his face, Jing Shao couldn’t resist leaning in to steal a kiss. “Did you study the military treatises? The offensive-yoke formation isn’t something you can just pick up from *Laws of the Chen Empire*.”

The smile on Mu Hanzhang’s face faded. “I studied military treatises when I was still very young.”

He began reading early as a child, and he had a good memory, so he often read other books in his spare time after finishing his homework. Back then, when he’d noticed how arrogant and undereducated Mu Lingbao was, often causing their father to sigh in dismay, he’d secretly learned military

strategy in the hopes that one day, should his father ever grow tired of his legitimate-born son, he would consider Mu Hanzhang instead. It wasn't until he got a bit older that he understood that a common-born son could not inherit the peerage, and even if he were ten or twenty times better than Mu Lingbao, their father would still never see them as equals.

Jing Shao's heart ached endlessly. That a radiant pearl had been hidden in dust—what a heartbreaking tragedy!

"As a matter of fact, I actually caught sight of you once when I was little," Mu Hanzhang said with a smile as Jing Shao's arms slowly tightened around him, and he rested his chin on his shoulder.

At that time, the emperor had been visiting the Beiwei Estate in plain clothes to play a game of weiqi with Mu Hanzhang's father, and he'd brought along a young Jing Shao. Mu Hanzhang had been very eager to see what the prince looked like but hadn't been permitted to go, as his principal mother only allowed Mu Lingbao to play with Jing Shao. He had been left to hide behind the rockery, watching them frolic in the ornamental gardens from afar.

"Really? I don't remember that at all," Jing Shao said, scratching his head.

For him, these things had happened several decades ago, so how could he possibly remember? But he felt a deep sense of regret despite himself, for he was quite curious to know what Junqing had been like as a child. He had no doubt that he must have been fair, with big, beautiful eyes like shining jewels.

"What did I do back then?" he asked.

"Well, you…" When Mu Hanzhang recalled what he'd seen, he couldn't help letting out a soft chuckle. "You wanted Mu Lingbao to be your

horse, and when he refused, you hit him so hard that he burst into tears. While he was crying, you kept sticking roses into his hair, and you called him a little girl because all he ever did was cry, telling him that having flowers in his hair would make it easier for him to find a husband."

Jing Shao chuckled smugly at these words—he'd never thought that Junqing would remember their childhood so clearly. "Oh, so even when you were a little kid, you wanted me to marry you so bad that you rushed to come have a look at me, I get it."

Mu Hanzhang's cheeks lit up at his words, and he stood up to rush him back to his royal tent. Jing Shao was forced to return to his own tent to bathe, and only once the candle had been extinguished did he quietly sneak back into the strategist's tent.

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QUITE EARLY IN THE MORNING on the next day, Jing Shao woke up the man in his arms, and while dawn was only just breaking, he took his consort and mounted Shadow, then headed straight for the distant mountains.

Mu Hanzhang helplessly watched his prince acting like a deserter leaving at the crack of dawn and leaned back against his chest with a small yawn. "Where are we going?"

"The village of Shanxia."

It was located at the foot of the Dahang Mountains. Though it was referred to as a village, it was practically already a town. The roads at the foot of the mountain allowed for easy passage, and so a market town had formed

here spontaneously. People from the surrounding villages often came here to sell herbs collected in the mountains and game meat, as well as to stock up on other provisions.

As it was an even day, there was a bazaar set up, and the only street in the village was teeming with noise and activity.

"Tiger pelts! The finest tiger pelts! From the magnificent giant tigers of Mount Ziyun. Top-quality pelts!" A hunter was hawking his wares on the street, attracting many onlookers.

"You must be skillful to be able to kill a tiger!" someone praised.

"You're completely right—now you see, at the time, that tiger had just caught itself a hare and was running for its cave when I got it in the eye with a single arrow!" Spittle flying, the hunter boasted of his conquest.

"A tigress bringing food back to her den means she had cubs to feed—the poor thing!" An old woman with a bamboo basket on her back sighed, shook her head, and left.

Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but frown. "What did the babies ever do…?"

Jing Shao, who'd been eagerly looking at the pelts, caught the sound of his sigh. Knowing that Mu Hanzhang was moved to compassion, he asked the hunter, "Do you still remember where the tiger's lair was?"

"Of course I do." The hunter's eyes craftily darted this way and that. "But no roads lead to it. And I'm the only one who knows how to get there."

Jing Shao dug out a bit of silver from one of his pockets. "Bring me the tiger cubs from the den. Here's the deposit. Meet me here in two days, and if you succeed, I'll pay you ten times that."

“Seriously?!” The hunter took the silver, overjoyed. “Rest assured, sir, I’ll take care of it!”

“They’re just animals—why bother pitying them?!” A butcher snorted from across the street. He raised the cleaver in his hand and loudly hacked the pork on the wooden chopping block into bits.

Mu Hanzhang’s heart swelled at Jing Shao’s actions, yet he frowned at the butcher’s words. He said to the butcher, “The babies are still too young to leave their home. If we don’t save them, they’ll starve to death.”

“Hmph, if it’s babies that have your pity,” the butcher said, waving a piece of pork in his hand, “would you shed tears for a suckling pig when you’re eating it?”

At this, Jing Shao turned toward the voice and found himself looking at a burly man dressed in nothing but pants, with a simple cloth pouch slung over one shoulder; he was waving around a piece of pork. Thrilled by his discovery, Jing Shao walked over to him at once. “Dare I ask, my good man, does your surname happen to be Hao?”

This man was the purpose of this trip—the descendant of a general from the previous dynasty, a formidable warrior he’d only managed to acquire by sheer chance in the 20th year of Hongzheng in his previous life: Hao Dadao!

“What, you can’t read or something?!” The butcher clanged the butcher knife in his hand against the large plaque hanging right above the meat stall.

Mu Hanzhang followed the knife with his gaze. Two big words were written on it: *Hao’s Meats.* Then he turned to Jing Shao, whose mouth was twitching at one corner, and couldn’t help but let out a muffled laugh.

Just then, a full-throated woman's voice rang out from within the house. "I asked you to chop some meat, but you're just yammering away without doing any work, aren't you?" A sturdily built woman came out carrying a bowl of meat and threw it in front of Hao Dadao with a clatter. "Chop chop, and when you're done cutting that up, make mince out of this. Papa Li is waiting on them!"

"All right." The butcher, who had been bad-tempered and volatile only moments before, only uttered this quiet response before he compliantly continued to chop pork.

Chapter 48:
Tiger Cub

MU HANZHANG WAITED in the town's only restaurant for nearly four hours before Jing Shao came over to see him, looking rather dejected.

"What's wrong? Did you not manage to persuade him?" Mu Hanzhang pushed a bowl of rice toward him and told the waiter to bring two more hot dishes.

When Jing Shao had laid eyes on Hao Dadao earlier, he had been ecstatic and tried to convince Hao Dadao to leave with him immediately, but to his surprise, the man had actually told him to wait, saying he needed to mince the meat first.

The midsummer day was scorching hot, and with High Noon approaching, Jing Shao didn't want his consort to suffer the heat, and so he had Mu Hanzhang wait for him at a restaurant while he waited for Hao Dadao in front of the butcher shop.

It had almost been another four hours before he got the chance to go inside the house to talk to Hao Dadao. Jing Shao had thought he understood the man quite well—as the descendant of a renowned general, masterful in martial arts and brilliant with tactics, being stuck in this small mountain village slaughtering pigs must have left him with unfulfilled aspirations. And yet, to his great astonishment, when Jing Shao made his intentions to recruit him clear, all the man gave him was a look that said, *Why are you being such a busybody?*

“I’m doing just fine for myself killing pigs and selling meat, so why should I risk my neck on the battlefield? No way!” Hao Dadao had said, shoving him out of the butcher shop.

“If you wish to gain a capable general, you must be prepared to be persistent.” Mu Hanzhang poured him a cup of water. “It will take the army a few more days yet to make its way around the Dahang Mountains, so we can stay here a while longer. There’s no rush.”

Jing Shao leaned his head back and downed the cup of water in one gulp. “The water here really is refreshing!”

Mu Hanzhang poured him another cup and told him that the water came straight from the well behind the restaurant, and it hadn’t been boiled. Cold and slightly sweet, it was quite pleasant. “I’ve already reserved a room in this inn.”

“Huh?” Jing Shao finished swallowing a mouthful of food and looked up at him. “Junqing, how did you figure out that I wouldn’t be able to persuade him immediately?”

“Even finding a wife requires writing three letters and going through six rites.[2] The recruitment of talent and a wife are based on the same principle, and it requires both sincerity and calculated maneuvering.” Mu Hanzhang slowly took a sip of water. “However, there is a complication.”

“What sort of complication?” Jing Shao’s brows furrowed, trying to work out what he meant.

In his previous life, during the 19th year of Hongzheng, a dim-witted, money-grubbing county magistrate had been assigned to this region. He had exploited the common people and failed to maintain order in his office, and

one of the yamen's[3] bailiffs had harassed the young daughter of Hao Dadao's neighbor. Unable to stomach this injustice, he took his pig-butchering knife and chopped the bailiff to death. The magistrate tried to have him arrested, and when the villagers petitioned on his behalf, that fool of a magistrate attempted to drive them off with whips. At that point, all hell broke loose, and the bailiffs somehow managed to kill two innocent villagers, inciting an immediate rebellion.

At the time, Jing Shao had just suffered a setback in his battles against King Huainan, and on his way back to the capital with his troops, he'd happened to encounter this peasant uprising. After quelling the rebellion with his soldiers, he'd executed the county magistrate in front of the masses to appease the public. Back then, Hao Dadao had trained a group of villagers who didn't know martial arts to the point that they could oppose the government's soldiers, and Jing Shao had felt a deep appreciation for his talent. Thus, he'd requested a pardon from the emperor and brought Hao Dadao into his ranks.

However, that magistrate probably hadn't even taken the imperial examination yet.

Mu Hanzhang said calmly, "The bedding in this inn is all very old, and I fear there might be fleas."

"What?" Jing Shao stared, uncomprehending, until he realized that this was the very complication his consort had mentioned.

As he took in his dumbfounded expression, a smile curled at the edges of Mu Hanzhang's lips. "Once we're done eating, we'll go get some fabric and make do by sleeping with that for the night."

“Why don’t you just ask the porter to get some new bedding?” Jing Shao frowned slightly. Run-down inns in remote mountain villages like this one always had fleas. What would he do if the pests ended up covering his consort’s smooth jade-like skin with hives and welts?

“Showing your wealth in a place like this can be very dangerous. Giving that silver to the hunter, for example, was already a mistake,” Mu Hanzhang advised as he meted out some food to Jing Shao’s bowl with his chopsticks.

“This town is known for its rare foraged goods and wild deer, and many merchants are drawn to the area to buy them. We’re hardly the wealthiest people here by any means.” Jing Shao picked up his bowl, slurped down its entire contents, and then extended it toward his princely consort.

Mu Hanzhang glared at him but distributed more food into his bowl. “The attendant told me that changing to a new set of bedding would cost a thousand coppers, while getting a new sheet from the cloth shop across the street would only cost thirty.”

Jing Shao choked on some rice at his words—they’d talked in circles, but in the end, Junqing just thought it was too expensive!

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BY THE TIME THE TWO OF THEM returned from buying two sheets from the textiles shop, there were only a few stalls still open for business. Most people who came to the bazaar were mountain folk who had to leave earlier in the day if they wanted to get home before dark, and so by sunset,

the streets were mostly deserted. Even the little stall that sold minced-meat noodles had closed. The two had no other choice but to return to the inn to order an overpriced dinner.

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THE ROOM IN THE INN was genuinely disgusting. As Jing Shao looked at the bed in front of him, he got the feeling that even should he spread the sheet in his hands over it, his consort would still be unwilling to lie on top of it. So, he simply carried Mu Hanzhang onto the inn's rooftop, spread the sheets over the layered roof tiling, and then bought a new quilt from the inn attendant at their high price.

"It's cold in the mountains at night. Without a new quilt, you'll freeze." Jing Shao wrapped his consort with it as he spoke. "That's how this inn does business—since it's the only one around these parts, we don't have a choice." It wasn't like they were short on money, so why was his consort getting stingier by the day?

Bundled up in the warm quilt, Mu Hanzhang rested his head on Jing Shao's arm and looked up at the night sky above the mountains. "Once this war is over, I want to start another business."

"Sure. In a couple of years, I'll take you to Jiangnan, and we can stay there. It's easy to start a business in Jiangnan." Smiling, Jing Shao pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms. "Why are you suddenly so concerned about money?"

“According to Xiao Yuan, in the past few years there’s been a lot of serious problems in the Ministry of Revenue. The national treasury was likely emptied long ago. If we want to fight for that position, we’re going to need money.”

Mu Hanzhang breathed out a sigh. They’d received a letter from Prince Rui yesterday, which had stated that the corruption case they’d uncovered in the military camps had expanded to incriminate more and more people. He had an inkling that Earl Yongchang and the fourth prince were likely behind it. If all of the silver embezzled over the past two years had gone to the fourth prince, that could spell trouble.

“Let’s worry about that later,” Jing Shao said, patting the top of Mu Hanzhang’s head. “Quick, help me think of a way to persuade Hao Dadao.”

He explained to Mu Hanzhang that in the former dynasty, Hao Dadao’s ancestor had been the General-in-Chief of Ferocity—and he’d been such a masterful strategist that he’d even earned the admiration of the founding emperor. After the fall of the former dynasty, that ancestor of the Haos refused to submit to the government. He seized the Dahang Mountains and proclaimed himself king. However, by Hao Dadao’s generation, their mountain stronghold had fallen into ruin, and he’d been reduced to butchering pigs for a living.

Mu Hanzhang closed his eyes and pondered for a moment. “When you put it that way, it sounds like his ancestors were against the current government. It might not be easy to ask him to defect to the Chen Empire now. I will come with you tomorrow and see if I can come up with a plan then.”

The two men spent the night on the rooftop, enjoying the cool summer mountain breeze, both of them comfortable under the quilt.

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THE NEXT DAY, just as they arrived at the front of the butcher shop, a man stepped into their path, blocking their way. Startled, Jing Shao immediately shielded Mu Hanzhang.

"My lord, you said that if I brought back a tiger cub, you'd pay me ten times the silver you gave me before. You weren't lying, right?" It was the hunter from yesterday. The moment he finished talking, he pushed forward a bamboo basket he had with him.

Jing Shao lifted its lid, only to find a dark *thing* within, scratching at the sides of the basket. "This is a tiger cub?"

"You think it's fake?!" The hunter grabbed the creature by the scruff of the neck and took it out. "I hiked up the mountain before dawn even broke, but all the other cubs were gone—something got to them. This one only survived because it fell into a mud pit."

Looking at the muddy brown mess that was the tiger cub, Jing Shao really didn't want to keep it, yet Mu Hanzhang had already bought a towel from a stall nearby and had wrapped the little thing in it. Jing Shao had no choice but to pay up and dismiss the hunter.

Wiping away some of the half-dried mud with the towel, Mu Hanzhang revealed the cub's little face. Although it was still caked in dirt, it was

obviously a tiger. Its body was barely a foot long, and with its eyes only half open, it gave a lethargic cry.

"Waaah."

"Aiyoh! A baby tiger!" Hao Dadao's plump wife was just carrying out a butcher block when she heard the baby tiger's call and eagerly came over to get a look.

Mu Hanzhang glanced at her. "Do you have some warm water in your house, ma'am? This tiger cub needs a bit of a wash."

"I sure do. Just boiled up a pot of water to scald the bristles off some pig skin. Come with me." Looking quite happy, Missus Hao beckoned Mu Hanzhang to follow her into the house.

Mu Hanzhang shot Jing Shao a look, then carried the tiger cub after her. When she found Hao Dadao slaughtering a pig in the courtyard, she said, "Go man the stall for me. I'm going to help bathe this little tiger before I head out there."

Hao Dadao furrowed his brows slightly at the sight of Mu Hanzhang, but he put down the butcher knife in his hand and left.

Though Hao's wife was fierce, she was extremely efficient. Quickly, she mixed up a basin of warm water and plopped the cub into it. "Come on, it's time for a bath!"

"Waaaargh!" Startled, the little cub let out a cry, but just as it was about to escape, it suddenly caught a whiff of pig blood on her arm.

It twitched its little nose, squinting its eyes which were half-shut with grime, and located the spot smeared with blood. Then, it opened its mouth to lick at it, and with every lick it grew more engrossed, finally opening its

mouth full of half-grown teeth to gnaw on her thick arm. But alas, the cub was small, and its teeth were smaller still, so no matter how much it gnawed, it couldn't get her whole arm into its mouth. So focused on this, it'd forgotten all about getting thrown into a basin of water.

Mu Hanzhang watched the way Hao's wife effortlessly washed the cub and asked, "Ma'am, do you happen to like raising pets?"

"Oh, I've loved these little things ever since I was little," Missus Hao said, laughing.

The gentleman before her was mild and kind, and his voice too was soft and elegant, making it hard for her to be rude. As she washed the cub, she chatted idly with Mu Hanzhang, even sharing stories of her childhood as a street performer with her father as well as how her dad had held a martial arts tournament to find her a husband.

"No doubt Mister Hao won the competition and that's how he managed to bring the beauty home, right?" Mu Hanzhang smiled, glancing over at Hao Dadao, who was entering the courtyard for the third time under the pretext of stocking up on more pork.

"Tch. Him?" Missus Hao glared at her husband. "He lied to my father, saying he was the bandit king of the Dahang Mountains, and tricked him into thinking that by marrying him I could live a life of luxury," she said, taking a towel and wrapping it around the freshly washed tiger cub before wiping it down. As the cub squirmed in protest, it mewed incessantly.

“I heard from the other villagers that the Hao clan’s ancestors really were once bandit kings.” Mu Hanzhang picked up the now clean tiger cub and examined it.

Its orange and black striped fur was wet, and perhaps because it had been well fed by its mother, it was still plump despite going hungry for a full day. It stared at him with a pair of round, glossy amber eyes.

“Wah!”

Chapter 49:
Returning to Camp

MISSUS HAO CLICKED her tongue. “Some bandit king.” She rose and pinched off a small lump of pork from the butcher block. “Their family’s been in decline since his grandfather’s generation.”

“With all of Mister Hao’s martial skills, don’t you think using it to kill pigs is a waste of his talent?” Mu Hanzhang sat down on a wooden stool in the courtyard, accepting the meat from Missus Hao, and he held it out in the palm of his hand for the tiger cub.

She shot him a look, huffing. “That damned fool does everything I ask him to do except for this. He just won’t budge! I told him that he should take the Imperial Military Exam, but he refuses to go. All he knows is slaughtering pigs. He’s got no ambition at all!”

A hint of a smile appeared on Mu Hanzhang’s lips. This woman may have come off as careless, but in reality, she was exceedingly perceptive. She already knew that they were here to talk Hao Dadao into joining them, so she’d invited Mu Hanzhang inside to bathe the tiger cub in order to dissuade them.

“You are as sensible of a person as I thought you were, ma’am. However, times have changed. Though the ancestor of the Haos was a general of the former dynasty, the founding emperor always thought highly of him and never once labeled his clan as rebels. Moreover, Mister Hao was born in the Chen Empire, so that makes him a Chen citizen. He can make a name for himself through his own abilities.”

Missus Hao watched the tiger cub eat in lieu of answering him.

It shook out its soaking wet coat and started tearing into the chunk of meat with immense gusto. It hadn't yet finished teething, however, so it was only able to nip little gaps in the meat as it ate, and then it had to turn its head to get at it from some other angle.

Since it was happily eating away, Mu Hanzhang decided not to disturb it. He simply spread out the towel so that sunlight would fall on its back and its fur would dry.

"No matter how diligent and frugal you are in managing the household, at the end of your lives, you'll still only be rich butchers. If you ever have children someday, would you want them to be butchers too?"

These words spurred Missus Hao into another bout of anger. "I yell at him about this every single day—even if he just joined up as a constable, it'd give our children something to look up to. But no, if we have a son, he'll be a butcher, and if we have a daughter, nobody will dare marry her!"

"Ma'am, you must know what our purpose is here. His Highness is someone who cherishes talent. In this day and age, a warrior that isn't from a noble lineage stands the best chance by serving under His Highness."

Now that the tiger was full, Mu Hanzhang picked it up to dry its fur some more. Bundled up in Mu Hanzhang's arms, the cub was a bit resistant at first, but as that gentle, slender hand stroked its fur over and over again, it gradually calmed down. Soon, the little tiger who'd spent a whole day fearing for its life finally fell asleep, letting out soft snores.

Mu Hanzhang sensed that he'd stayed long enough; saying too much could become counterproductive. And so, he stood up with his furry cargo and said, "His Highness will not force him to do anything—he really only

went out of his way to come here because he felt it was regrettable that Mister Hao's talent was going to waste. However, the army is on the march, and we cannot afford to tarry here much longer. We will be on our way tomorrow. If Mister Hao truly does not wish to join us, then that is how it shall be."

He left a single silver bit on the rattan chair as payment for helping him bathe the tiger cub, as well as for the pork. Before Missus Hao could say anything else, he walked out of their house.

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AFTER JING SHAO and Mu Hanzhang departed, Missus Hao grabbed Hao Dadao by the ear and dragged him into the house.

"My good woman, what you're saying makes a lot of sense, but this Prince Cheng is quick to anger and prone to unpredictable moods. If I were to become his subordinate, once these princes start vying for the position of crown prince, this path can only lead to death." Hao Dadao sat dejectedly on his chair.

He'd overheard everything Lord Jun said earlier today—as he'd been born a citizen of the Chen Empire, he should serve the land that had raised him. To him, the previous dynasty was so far in the past that perhaps his insistence on staying loyal to them was unwarranted. As a valiant warrior with no place to use his skills, he wasn't completely unaware of his building frustrations over the years, but Prince Cheng really didn't appear a good master.

“That’s not necessarily true—you can tell how well he treats that strategist of his. He even bought him a tiger! A master who cherishes his subordinate the way he would his own wife is far superior to those two-faced scholars!”

This prince had come all the way to a village at the foot of the mountains just to see Hao Dadao, which just went to show how sincere he was. And besides, they were going to leave tomorrow. Once this opportunity passed him by, it wouldn’t come again. Missus Hao was a little worried.

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ON THE ROOF, the tiger cub scratched excitedly at the sheet beneath the three of them. Jing Shao picked up the restless ball of fluff by the scruff. “If you keep moving around, I’m going to toss you off from here!”

The cub tried to squirm out of his grip, then turned its head to bite him, but its neck was so short it couldn’t reach him at all. It ended up flailing around instead.

“Eh, it’s a little boy!” Jing Shao stuck out a finger and poked at the little round hole hidden in his white fur.

“Really?” Mu Hanzhang, resting on Jing Shao’s arm, craned his head to look, but he couldn’t see clearly, so he reached out and moved the cub to the space between the two of them.

“*Meow*.” The little cub was rather unhappy about being placed on his back. With a whine, he dug his claws into the sheet and flipped over, facing

the two who were touching him in strange places on his butt.

"Where should we send him?" Grabbing the little tail as it whipped back and forth, Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together, already feeling a little attached. Taking an essentially useless tiger cub along on a military march was indeed inappropriate, yet he really was loath to part with him.

Noticing his consort's reluctance, Jing Shao, who had planned on buying the tiger as his consort's new pet from the very beginning, smiled. "Kiss me and I'll let you keep him."

"Really?" Mu Hanzhang turned to look at him.

Jing Shao nodded, solemnly closed his eyes, and pointed at his own lips. He waited for quite some time, yet he didn't sense any movement from the man next to him. Just as he was about to open his eyes again, he felt heated breath slowly approaching, closer and closer until a slightly cool, soft, and furry something touched the corner of his mouth. His eyes snapped open to meet a pair of innocent amber eyes.

"Rah-aah?"

He looked up to find Mu Hanzhang holding the tiger cub aloft, laughing so hard that he ended up collapsing onto him.

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THE NEXT DAY, when Jing Shao visited the butcher again, Missus Hao was chopping meat at the pork stall and an unfamiliar horse was stationed next to her.

“There you are!” Missus Hao exclaimed, delighted to see the two of them. She’d been fretting all day that they might have lost their patience and left without coming by again.

As she wiped her hands on her apron, she said, “I’ll go get him!” before turning around and heading into their house. There was a lot of noise and indistinct arguing from inside, and it took a while before Hao Dadao, with his family heirloom Primordial Blade slung over his shoulder, finally got dragged out by his wife.

Jing Shao quickly stepped forward and embraced the somewhat reluctant Hao Dadao. “It is the fortune of three lifetimes for this one that you’re willing to come out of seclusion to help me out, Mister Hao!” His tone was sincere, yet he possessed the gallantry of a military general, making him instantly likable.

“You flatter me, Your Highness. I’m just a man with nothing but brute strength, and it’s my good fortune for you to think so highly of me.”

Hao Dadao felt a bit self-conscious. He wondered silently how this Prince Cheng could show such remarkable composure and competence for one so young. When he thought back to the detailed conversation they’d had that day alone in the butcher shop, it almost seemed possible that the prince was genuinely an enlightened leader. For now, Hao Dadao decided to follow him to see how things would unfold.

“I’ll pass on this butcher shop to someone else, and then I’ll come after the army to meet up with you.”

Missus Hao waved the butcher knife she held in her hand at the three as they mounted their horses. “Give me a couple of butcher knives, and I can be useful on the battlefield too!”

They needed to quickly catch up to the rest of the army on their return trip, so Hao Dadao led them through paths that cut across the mountains in order to intercept the army at its front.

Jing Shao was overjoyed to have gained the formidable warrior Hao Dadao. Among the three vassal kings, King Huainan was the most challenging of them all; his strategy and cunning were second only to Jing Shao's own, even surpassing him when it came to using certain underhanded methods.

Although the Huainan army was nowhere near as large as the imperial government's main forces, it had still managed to send him back to the capital holding his head in defeat again and again. If it weren't for Hao Dadao's assistance, conquering the Huainan Fiefdom would have taken him ten years. Now that he had attained this warrior ahead of schedule, he had without a doubt significantly reduced the time it would take to conquer the Xinan and Dongnan regions.

Hao Dadao shot an odd look over at Mu Hanzhang, who rode in front of Prince Cheng and shared his horse. "Why doesn't Master Jun ride by himself?"

"His horsemanship is terrible. When he's on the march with us, he usually rides in a carriage," Jing Shao explained.

Mu Hanzhang elbowed him. His horsemanship was just fine, actually, but Jing Shao never let him ride on his own, always worrying that he'd fall off.

Hao Dadao shot them a disapproving look; His Highness was already married to his primary wife, so it was highly inappropriate for him to conduct

himself in such a manner with his strategist. And so, he went on ahead to clear the way, to more effectively ignore the awkward impropriety.

"The cub doesn't have a name yet. What should we call him?" asked Mu Hanzhang.

As Hao Dadao moved ahead, Mu Hanzhang relaxed and leaned back against Jing Shao's chest, stroking the head of the tiger cub in his lap who'd been moving around, trying to catch Shadow's mane.

"Let's call him Li'l Sunbeam." Jing Shao freed up a hand and flicked his fluffy round head.

"Waaarh!" The little cub shook his head and grabbed Jing Shao's hand to chew on it in protest. But alas, most of his teeth hadn't grown in yet, so the fingers kept getting caught in the gaps between his teeth, making the little cub so distressed that he whimpered.

"That sounds like a cat's name." Mu Hanzhang frowned.

"All the animals in my estate have names that start with 'Li'l'!" Jing Shao jutted his chin at his horse, who was cantering along with his head down, whose full name was Li'l Shadow.

"Li'l—" Mu Hanzhang swallowed down the "Li'l Spoon" that was at the tip of his tongue. "Li'l Sunbeam it is, then."

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WITH THE HELP of Hao Dadao's shortcuts, the three of them traversed the mountains within a day, and after a brief rest in a small town

next to the highway, they reached the main forces.

When they returned to base camp, Mu Hanzhang found his concerns that Zhao Meng and the others might ostracize Hao Dadao allayed the moment Zhao Meng saw Hao Dadao's Primordial Blade—he grabbed his arm, demanding a sparring match.

Jing Shao gave Mu Hanzhang a reassuring look; as they say, birds of a feather flock together, and these brawny men were actually the easiest kind of people to get along with. A single sparring match or a jar of strong liquor could quickly make them sworn brothers.

Soon, the two warriors were facing each other in the open area in front of the tents, attracting an audience of numerous soldiers.

The Right Guardian, who was nearby watching the show, spotted the little orange furball in Master Jun's arms and eagerly approached him. "Master Jun, what is that?"

"Rah?" The slumbering cub, who'd been snoring contentedly, opened up his big drowsy eyes. His round, furry ears had flipped over in his sleep making his current appearance rather comical.

"Aiyoh! A baby tiger!" the Right Guardian exclaimed in surprise, snatching the little cub and holding him up for a closer look.

The tiger cub whined. He was shy around strangers and kept trying to twist out of the Right Guardian's hold. Unfortunately, he was a small tiger and lacked strength, so he couldn't escape. With no other option, he raised a tiny furry paw and swiped at the Right Guardian's handsome face.

"Aiyoh!" Caught off guard, the Right Guardian yowled in pain, involuntarily loosening his grip, and the tiger cub fell toward the ground.

Mu Hanzhang scrambled to try to catch him, when in a blink, a shadow flashed by.

Surprised, he looked up to find the little furball was resting safely in Ge Ruoyi’s arms.

Chapter 50:
Tiger Fangs, Crane Beak

"WELL DONE!" Ge Ruoyi's footwork was so impressive that the Right Guardian had to exclaim his admiration. Even though he'd just acquired three fresh, bleeding scratches, he didn't seem to mind what had happened to his face. No wonder Master Jun had brought a handmaiden along to the battlefield; it turned out she was a master martial artist!

Mu Hanzhang raised an eyebrow. Ge Ruoyi had only been learning concealed weaponry from Nine-Blade Ghost for a few months. How had she managed to gain such celerity?

"That was a special move passed down in my family, called 'Barefoot Treading on Waves.' It's just a minor technique. Please excuse my clumsiness, Right Guardian," Ge Ruoyi said with a smile as she soothed the little tiger in her arms.

"Aiyah, but that's amazing. When you have the time, you should teach me too!" The Right Guardian sidled over with a grin and poked the little tiger on the head. "Little one, you sure have a temper!"

Noticing that Ge Ruoyi looked a little uncomfortable, Mu Hanzhang stepped forward and took the cub from her, teasing the Right Guardian. "Ruoyi already told you it's an ancestral art. If you wish to learn it, you must first become part of the Ge family."

The Right Guardian chuckled. “Sure! I can do that—aiyoh!” Somebody slapped him upside the head as he was about to say more. He turned angrily and came face-to-face with the expressionless Left Guardian. “Why are you hitting me again?!”

“Your face is bleeding,” said the Left Guardian.

“Really?” The Right Guardian touched it, and sure enough, the scratch was oozing blood, and it stung quite a bit too. “It’s all right. This little cut will scab over in no time.”

“You need to put topical ointment on it.” The Left Guardian took his arm and immediately started dragging him away to do so.

“On this little thing? Nah. A facial scar is a sign of manliness—His Majesty might even credit me with military merit because I got this cut on my face!” The Right Guardian struggled with all his might. If he went around putting ointment on a little cut like this, he would never hear the end of it from that rascal Zhao Meng.

“Then how were you planning to report this achievement to His Majesty? Are you going to say King Xinan scratched your face?” Impatient, the Left Guardian grabbed his collar and tugged the boisterous fellow into a tent.

Left in quiet at last, Mu Hanzhang rubbed the tiger cub’s fuzzy head with a smile. *I really should start trimming this little guy’s claws.*

Ignoring the racket from the people outside, the road-weary Mu Hanzhang returned to his tent and sprawled out over his spacious, soft bed. After sleeping on a roof for two days, he really had missed this clean and pillowy cloud. The tiger cub patrolled the bed from top to bottom, then

started pouncing on the soft blankets that undulated with his movements, having quite the time.

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BY THE TIME Ge Ruoyi came in with his dinner, Mu Hanzhang had almost nodded off entirely. The cub was enthusiastically chewing on a lock of Mu Hanzhang's hair that he held between his paws. Smiling, Ge Ruoyi placed the tray on the small dining table inside the tent.

"My lord, have something to eat before you go to sleep."

The hot food awakened Mu Hanzhang's ferocious appetite as soon as its scent hit his nose; he'd been eating nothing but dry rations all day. He rescued his hair from the tiger's maw and wiped the saliva off with a towel before he sat down in front of the dining table.

As he took in the delicious, aromatic spread before him, Mu Hanzhang couldn't hide his surprise. "Did you make all this?" Even though their rations had improved in the army, there was no way their quality could have grown this much.

"You're exhausted, my lord, so you should eat something nice," Ge Ruoyi said, shooting him a smile. His Highness had specifically instructed her earlier to personally cook two dishes for the princely consort.

"That's so thoughtful of you, but let's not do this too often, all right? As a strategist, I should eat the same food as the other soldiers." This said, he picked up his chopsticks anyway. "Get some meat scraps to feed the baby

tiger.” He simply could not bring himself to call him by the name “Li’l Sunbeam.” Calling a tiger that just felt a bit silly.

Ge Ruoyi glanced at the tiger cub that was gnawing on a pillow on the bed and ladled out a bowl of soup for Mu Hanzhang. “I’ll get some later. If you want to keep this tiger cub, it’s best if it eats out of your hand.”

She explained that if a beast like this was reared from a cub, it would regard the person who fed it as its parent. That way, it wouldn’t harm its master once it had grown.

Mu Hanzhang gave a small nod at her words. “Ruoyi, how did you know that?”

“Back in the day, my family operated in maritime trade, and my father once acquired a lion cub…” Ge Ruoyi said, the smile on her face gradually fading. As it had tried to protect her, that lion had been practically turned into a sieve under multiple volleys of arrows from King Dongnan’s archers. She’d only managed to survive by hiding under its corpse.

She took a small coin purse out from under her collar and handed it over to Mu Hanzhang. Peering inside revealed to him a tuft of golden lion’s mane. The strands were tough and bright, and it was easy to imagine the majestic creature to which they used to belong.

Mu Hanzhang tightened the coin purse’s strings and returned it to Ge Ruoyi, then let out a soft sigh. “Ruoyi, now that the war has begun, it is as they say: Once the lips are gone, all the teeth behind them will chatter in the cold. King Dongnan will not sit idly by and simply watch us abolish the Xinan Fiefdom, especially since an attack on Dongnan is inevitable…”

“My lord, there’s no point trying to talk me out of it. My mind is already made up.” Ge Ruoyi clutched the coin purse tightly. She was smiling,

yet her eyes were brimming with tears. “I live only for revenge. Crushing Dongnan with an army can never ease the hatred in my heart!”

Mu Hanzhang could only sigh.

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THEY MARCHED FOR ANOTHER fortnight before the first wave of the main force met up with Prince Cheng’s Vanguard Battalion.

At the border of Shu, they were caught in a sudden downpour, and Jing Shao ordered them to set up camp immediately. Getting rained on while short on medicinal herbs meant that illnesses could easily spread through the army, and it wasn’t as if they moved particularly fast in the rain anyway, making traveling in inclement weather a losing proposition. It would be better to wait out the rain before proceeding.

“Junqing, stay in there for now. I’ll call you when the camp is set up,” Jing Shao said, lifting the curtain to the carriage to speak to the man inside.

“You should come in too.” Mu Hanzhang put down the tiger cub and grabbed a towel to wipe the rainwater off Jing Shao’s face.

Smiling, Jing Shao poked the cub with a finger dripping with water. “I’ll be fine. But I must keep an eye on them.”

Then he jumped off the carriage to direct everyone as they set up camp. The Hunan regiment that had come to join them was led by its own general, and they’d be more than reluctant to follow Zhao Meng’s orders, so he had to step in.

Ge Ruoyi glanced up at the sky. “My lord, I must go.”

“Right now?” Mu Hanzhang stared blankly at her, slightly stunned. It was raining so hard that even these burly men in the army had to stop and make camp for a few days. It felt unwise for a frail young woman to begin traveling now.

Ge Ruoyi smiled. “Once it starts raining like this, it could go on for five days straight. His Highness got the news yesterday that King Xinan has started selecting beauties to gift to King Dongnan. If I get there late, I’ll likely miss it.”

Mu Hanzhang’s brow furrowed, and when his eyes landed on this young woman who’d said such a thing like it was nothing, he felt an inexplicable ache in his heart for her.

“Take this. Once you’ve had your revenge, don’t do anything foolish. Wait for us in Dongnan.”

Ge Ruoyi took the banknote Mu Hanzhang handed her and fell silent for a long while before she knelt on the footrest and kowtowed three times. “If by chance I manage to survive, I will repay Prince Cheng and Your Highness’s kindness for the rest of my life!”

By the time Jing Shao had finished directing everyone to set up the tents, he was completely drenched. Clad in a straw raincoat, Ge Ruoyi approached, leading her horse, and she stopped in front of him.

“You should go now. Someone will meet you outside Shengjing Pass.” Jing Shao handed her a token to prove her identity. “Did you say your goodbyes to the princely consort?”

“I have.” Rain fell, the sound of its pattering disguising the catch in her voice.

She knelt and respectfully kowtowed three times to Jing Shao, then mounted her steed, cracked the whip, and was gone. Its hooves kicked up muddy water, splashing it everywhere, and the graceful figure hidden beneath the raincoat quickly disappeared into the veil of rain.

The most frightening people in the world were those with nothing to lose; that was why the ancient sages had said that one must not push people too far. Nature’s law and moral order were inescapable principles, and karmic retribution never failed to catch those deserving of its ire in the end. Those who pushed others to the brink would eat the fruits of their wicked deeds in time. Just like Jing Shao’s own rebirth, it seemed that fate worked in mysterious ways.

He stood there lost in his thoughts for a moment before heading toward the carriage that the coachman had driven to the front of his tent.

Since the downpour had blocked the road, Jing Shao spent several days lazing in the warmth of the strategist’s tent. However, he was beginning to like Li’l Sunbeam less and less.

“Junqing…” Jing Shao said, pinning his consort down onto the bed, “since it’s not like there’s anything urgent we have to do, let’s do something fun…” He began to untie the robe of the man lying beneath him.

“No, not in broad daylight,” Mu Hanzhang said with a groan as he struggled to dislodge the man on top of him.

“Wahhrr.” The cub copied Jing Shao’s actions by pouncing onto Mu Hanzhang, then scratched and gnawed on that snow-white belt.

“Go away. He’s mine!” Immediately taking offense, Jing Shao grabbed the cub by the scruff and tossed it aside.

With the assumption that he was simply playing with him, the energetic tiger cub charged right back in to hug Jing Shao’s hand and nibble at it, his belly up and his two hind legs kicking in the air.

Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help laughing out loud. Jing Shao’s face fell as he stared at his consort—when he heard him laugh at a time like this, the atmosphere simply vanished into thin air.

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WHEN THE CLOUDS finally dispersed and the rain stopped, the army moved forward once more, quickly joining forces with the Shu troops. By the time they reached the Xinan border, it was the Ninth Month. The Guizhou army was already waiting there, and thus, the one-hundred-thousand-strong main force had been fully assembled.

Though they were supposed to camp fifteen miles away from Shengjing Pass, Jing Shao ordered them thirty miles west of it instead.

“Your Highness, if we want to enter Xinan, we must go through Shengjing Pass,” Zhao Meng said, looking at the map. He didn’t approve of Jing Shao’s choice of location; it would be much easier to move siege engines if they got closer.

The Laohei Mountains stretched on for more than seventy miles from north to south, and Shengjing Pass was the only low-lying part of it. If their

plan was to advance into Xinan, this was the only route they could realistically take.

"Shengjing Pass must be heavily garrisoned. If we attack right there, our side will suffer severe casualties," Jing Shao said quietly from his seat on the platform.

Advancing through Shengjing Pass to attack Xinan would normally be considered the best approach—even Jing Shao had thought as much in his past life. To his surprise, however, while Shengjing Pass was easy enough to breach, ambush after ambush had been set up all along the narrow mountain path for miles on end, not to mention multiple fortified checkpoints.

If they crossed the border here, even if they managed to break through, it would be time-consuming and exhaust their forces, giving King Xinan the upper hand. It could possibly even drag the war out until King Dongnan came to his rescue with reinforcements.

"Then what should we do? Aside from Shengjing Pass, Huya Pass is the only other crossing for a hundred miles. Are you saying we have to cross into Xinan from there?" Hao Dadao couldn't help but speak up.

He'd studied tactics since childhood and was thoroughly knowledgeable regarding these passes. The Huya Pass here wasn't the same as the Huya Pass in Jing Province; this one was nicknamed Tiger Fangs, Crane Beak. Its terrain was treacherous, with craggy rocks that resembled a crane's beak and overhanging cliffs like jagged, uneven tiger fangs, with only a single mountain path for passage. It was truly the kind of legendary terrain that made it possible to guard a pass with a single man!

"Raaaowr…" These days, only Jing Shao called the baby tiger by his name, while everyone else called him Little Tiger. So when Li'l Sunbeam

heard someone mention tiger fangs, he assumed they were addressing him and responded with a cry.

Chapter 51:
Stratagem Out of a Silken Pouch

NOTICING JING SHAO'S determination, Mu Hanzhang quickly spoke in support of him. "The Laohei Mountains stretch on for seventy miles, and once we get past the gate in Shengjing Pass, we'll have to travel through a narrow path that goes on for another ten miles. If there are ambushes along the way, they'll eliminate us like sitting ducks. The conditions are unfavorable to us without reinforcements."

"Master Jun makes a valid point, but Huya Pass is even more treacherous than Shengjing Pass. All King Xinan needs to do is set up a formation with less than a hundred men, and they'd be able to stand in the way of at least a thousand of us." Zhao Meng furrowed his brow, pointing to the location of the tiger and crane pass.

Though Jing Shao knew a way to get through Huya Pass, if the present Jing Shao, who had never been to Xinan before, presented this method, it would be far too specific and cunning to be able to convince the others.

He frowned. "We will discuss this further tomorrow!"

The group dispersed, leaving Jing Shao sitting behind the platform, staring down at a map of Xinan with a deep furrow that remained etched in his brow. Living a second life meant that he knew exactly how things would go yet was unable to inform others, which was extremely frustrating. He let out a light sigh. If he couldn't figure out some way to let them know how to make it through Huya Pass, he'd have to ask them to lead a contingent over

to Shengjing Pass while he personally led another unit of light cavalry to storm Huya Pass himself.

Seeing the way he was acting, Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together and sat down next to Jing Shao. “Did you happen to receive some intel that you can’t mention?”

Jing Shao looked up, and finding his worried consort looking at him, he reached out and pulled him into his arms. “Junqing, how do you always know exactly what I’m thinking?”

“Don’t you know all strategists can read minds?” Smiling, Mu Hanzhang teased him right back, gradually lowering his gaze.

It was precisely because he was fond of Jing Shao that he was constantly mindful of his moods—though he could tell that Jing Shao had quite the knowledge pool, he had no idea where his information was coming from. Since Jing Shao never brought it up, he couldn’t ask about it. When the day Jing Shao wished to talk about it finally came, he would naturally tell Mu Hanzhang.

“Junqing, there are some things that even I can’t explain. I’m not intentionally keeping things from you.” Jing Shao breathed out a sigh and rested his chin on Mu Hanzhang’s shoulder.

Mu Hanzhang hummed softly, then slowly sat up straight and met his eyes. “So, let’s hear about the information you have, and let me see if I can help you.”

Jing Shao pulled the map over from the table and pointed out every location where the Xinan army had set up an ambush that he was aware of. He then told him the solution to getting through Huya Pass in detail.

The more Mu Hanzhang listened, the deeper his frown grew. Whoever Jing Shao had placed in Xinan as a spy was truly formidable to have gained such detailed knowledge of the army's setup and terrain; however, it was precisely due to its level of detail that the information sounded unbelievable.

"There's no way they'd accept all this if I explained it, and besides, the battlefield could change at any moment, and I don't have complete confidence that King Xinan will follow this plan to the letter." Jing Shao sighed.

Even though he knew everything that was going to happen, as time changed so too did the world—not everything would proceed along an identical path, and it was this fact that was suddenly making him a little indecisive.

"Who do you believe is best suited to breach Huya Pass?" Mu Hanzhang didn't respond to his words, directly asking this question instead.

"Hao Dadao!" Jing Shao said without hesitation.

This, too, was one of the reasons he'd been so eager to recruit Hao Dadao. In his previous life, after struggling to take Shengjing Pass for months only to run into ambush after ambush once they finally managed to break through, Jing Shao had been the one to take on Huya Pass himself.

They'd run out of options, and that was why Jing Shao, the grand marshal of his army, made the risky decision to lead his men through Huya Pass. The tiger and crane pass might have seemed perilous, but there weren't many troops stationed there, and skill was key. Only someone with a mastery of martial arts and the ability to think on their feet could breach Huya Pass.

Mu Hanzhang nodded slightly. "You can leave it all to me. I'm sure I

can persuade him by the end of the night."

When he heard "by the end of the night," Jing Shao felt a chill run through his heart. "How are you going to persuade him?"

"I have my ways." Mu Hanzhang smiled mysteriously, but all of a sudden, Jing Shao grabbed his wrists and pinned them behind his back. He lost his balance immediately and fell into Jing Shao's arms.

"You can't!" Jing Shao was immediately hot with fury.

Asking his consort to go to Hao Dadao in the middle of the night to persuade him seemed dicey no matter how he looked at it. His consort was too attractive, and if Hao Dadao were to take this opportunity to make some inappropriate demands, Junqing might just compromise in order not to make things hard for Jing Shao, and then… The more he thought about it, the more terrifying the proposition seemed. In any case, he was absolutely not going to let him go.

Mu Hanzhang was utterly confounded by Jing Shao's actions until he heard him say something like "a beast in human guise" and "a master of martial arts," and finally worked out what Jing Shao was going on about. Despite himself, he felt both amused and exasperated.

"What on earth are you imagining?"

He couldn't fathom how Jing Shao had managed to derive so many scenarios from a single simple thing he'd said. Could it be because he'd been pondering so much strategy lately and thought so many steps ahead no matter what he was thinking about that his thoughts were starting to spiral even over the most mundane details?

The two of them argued for ages, but ultimately, Mu Hanzhang could not change his mind. He ended up being forced to agree to let Jing Shao eavesdrop outside the tent.

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JING SHAO STOOD OUTSIDE Hao Dadao's tent holding his breath and carefully attuning his mind to the sounds within.

"What brings you here at such a late hour, Master Jun?" Hao Dadao asked very politely.

"It is because of a pressing matter that I had to come disturb you, General," said Mu Hanzhang with equal courtesy, his voice gentle and sonorous, rather pleasant to the ear.

"Hah! I am but a deputy commander appointed by His Highness, hardly worthy of that title." Hao Dadao sat down and began to carefully polish his Primordial Blade.

"Given your skills, Mister Hao, you'll be promoted to the rank of general sooner rather than later," said Mu Hanzhang, smiling faintly. "However, as you were appointed to the rank of deputy commander as soon as you joined the army, even though most of the soldiers know what you're capable of, it will be difficult to convince them of your merit without military achievements."

Hao Dadao had sparred with Zhao Meng the moment he'd arrived, and even though his combat experience didn't match that of General Zhao—who'd spent years on the battlefield—his exceptional martial skills allowed

him to hold his own. In the end, using his family's Primordial Chaos saber style, he had managed to restrain Zhao Meng's iron whip with a single maneuver, so Jing Shao had been able to make an exception and appoint him as a deputy commander outright.

"I am aware of that, of course. If you have something to say, Master Jun, feel free to go ahead and say it."

Hao Dadao's impression of this strategist was a positive one, for his intelligence and emotional maneuvering were both exceptional. At the village of Shanxia, he had been able to tell right away that the key to convincing Hao Dadao to join the army lay with his nagging wife, and he'd managed to persuade her with just a few words.

Jing Shao stood outside the tent, tracking the passing of time. Neither tent occupant spoke loudly, and some of their words were indistinct. It all made him a little anxious.

"Your Highness, what are you doing here?" The Right Guardian spotted Jing Shao and patted him on the shoulder excitedly. "Are you here to discuss saber techniques with Mister Hao as well?"

Discuss my ass! The veins in Jing Shao's forehead were throbbing away, and his fists were clenched tight enough for his knuckles to pop. Just then, Mu Hanzhang lifted the tent flap and stepped outside.

When he saw the stormy look on Jing Shao's face, Mu Hanzhang suppressed the urge to smile and said to the Right Guardian, "It's getting late, and General Hao has to lead the troops tomorrow. You should get to bed soon as well."

Rather disappointed at missing out on a discussion of saber techniques, the Right Guardian found his thoughts turning to how the Left Guardian

handled his sword, which was basically like a saber, so he excitedly set off for the Left Guardian's tent instead. Either way, the two guardians were responsible for holding down the fort while the army was away and were never assigned to fight on the battlefield, so it was all right for them to lose a bit of sleep.

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"How did you end up explaining to him how to get through the tiger and crane pass?" asked Jing Shao, lying on the bed and holding his strategist. Since the Right Guardian had interrupted, Jing Shao had missed what Junqing had said, and Junqing had emerged soon afterward. So how had he managed to explain it all? Jing Shao found himself rather curious.

"A sage keeps his tricks close to the chest," said Mu Hanzhang enigmatically.

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The next day, everyone convened in the command pavilion once more. Mu Hanzhang had donned a deep blue wide-sleeved robe, put on a dark-colored headscarf, and held a feather fan in one hand, appearing before the crowd the very picture of a reclusive sage.

"This marshal has made his decision. Three thousand men will storm the tiger and crane pass—who volunteers?" Jing Shao addressed those below

the platform, his eyes slowly sweeping over them.

“Three thousand lightly armored soldiers will suffice. I will go!” Hao Dadao stepped up without hesitation.

He’d already read the contents of the silken pouch Master Jun had given him last night. The details within were so meticulously laid out that they had clearly come from prior reconnaissance. With such useful information, if he failed to breach the pass, he might as well abandon his family name!

“Wonderful!” Jing Shao gave a gratified smile and ordered, “Hao Dadao is to lead a contingent of cavalry numbering three thousand to Huya Pass. You march at once!”

“I humbly accept!” Hao Dadao took the order and left.

There was no objection from the group about only three thousand troops being sent to try their luck at that natural barrier, and so they began discussing their tactics for taking Shengjing Pass.

“Last night, while reading the constellations, this sage managed to find some patterns in the stars,” Mu Hanzhang said suddenly.

Zhao Meng immediately responded, “Master Jun, please elaborate.” Ever since what had happened with the fodder investigation, he had become very trusting of Master Jun and willing to consider anything he had to say.

“Of course, Shengjing Pass should remain our main focus. If General Zhao leads troops there, he’ll surely be able to defeat the enemy in one fell swoop,” Mu Hanzhang said to Zhao Meng, who looked visibly pleased. “However, once you pass through the gates, there may be unexpected developments.”

“What do you mean?” a young officer next to him couldn’t help asking. The strategists of legend always sat calmly in the command pavilion just like this Master Jun, and by observing the stars, they could trace the paths of causality. Being so fortunate as to witness this firsthand, he felt quite overwhelmed with excitement.

And so, Mu Hanzhang carefully explained the pros and cons, yet he didn’t reveal exactly where the Xinan troops were lying in ambush—all he did was point out several weak points, leaving everyone deeply shaken.

“Master Jun, are you sure about this?” Even Zhao Meng seemed uncertain, for he’d never met anyone who could read the stars before, so he could not attest to its accuracy. However, if matters really were just as Master Jun said, they’d have to alter their battle plans.

“Master Jun’s astrology is never wrong. Zhao Meng, heed this order—you are to lead fifty thousand troops and lay siege to Shengjing Pass,” Jing Shao said, interrupting at an opportune moment.

Zhao Meng accepted the order. Mu Hanzhang handed him three embroidered silken pouches and left him these instructions: “You may open the first silken pouch upon reaching Shengjing Pass. Open the second one once you’re through the gates. Then, seven miles after you’re through the gates you will come to a ravine, and that’s when you should open the very last one. You must not open them ahead of time—this is imperative.”

Jing Shao sat behind the desk, watching his consort put on his “sage with divine foresight” act, and somehow these hardheaded fools were eating it all up without a shred of doubt. He had to subtly pinch himself to keep from laughing out loud.

Once Zhao Meng had left with his officers, Jing Shao summoned the commander of the Shu troops. “Be at the ready. You will stand by with your thirty thousand men, and as soon as we get a message, you will enter Xinan through Huya Pass in the offensive-yoke formation to rendezvous with Hao Dadao. This Prince has already informed Hao Dadao what to do after that. You just have to follow his orders.”

“Understood,” said the commander of the Shu troops, and he left.

Once everyone else was gone, Jing Shao remained silent for a moment, then looked up at his consort, who was still sitting there, waving his fan. “Junqing, today, you really were—” Before he could even finish his sentence, Jing Shao burst into laughter and collapsed onto his desk.

Mu Hanzhang cast a look toward him, seeming rather unconcerned. “Strategists have sewn stratagems into embroidered pouches since time immemorial. This sage was merely imitating the ancients.”

If anyone else had tried to pull off what he did today, it would have come off as deceitful, but with Mu Hanzhang’s calm demeanor and inscrutable air, he’d somehow managed to convince these people that something as ludicrous as seeing the future from reading the stars actually worked.

As Jing Shao watched him, the smile gradually faded from his face. “Junqing, even I can’t be completely certain of the outcome of what we did today. If we miscalculated, it will affect your credibility in the army. What will you do then?”

If he had been the one to tell them all this, then if things went wrong, it would have been considered nothing more than a momentary lapse, for no

marshal was infallible. But for a strategist like Junqing, what he said had to be proven true in order for him to retain his credibility within the army.

Mu Hanzhang could see the worry in his eyes and smiled despite himself. “It’s not like I’m planning to use this to earn a position. Even if I lose credibility in the army, so what? Would Your Highness divorce me?”

Chapter 52:
Shengjing Pass

THE WORRY ON JING SHAO'S FACE slowly transformed into a silly grin. He grabbed Mu Hanzhang, wrapping him into his embrace. "Well now, we'll see about that. Who was it that asked me for a writ of divorce, hmm?" *Look who can't bear to part with me now?* But ultimately, he didn't dare say the last sentence out loud.

"Oh, if you divorce me, I'll easily be able to marry you into the House of Beiwei as a wife." Mu Hanzhang tapped Jing Shao's head with his feather fan.

"Mm-hmm, that's not a bad idea," Jing Shao said and leaned in to kiss him.

"In your dreams. I wouldn't want you for a wife." Mu Hanzhang dodged his kiss and stood up. "You eat too much and don't do anything around the house. Why would I marry you?" Then, he picked up the tiger cub at his feet and turned on his heel to walk out with effortless flair.

Jing Shao stared blankly after him for a long moment. *This is bloody mutiny! How dare Mu Hanzhang say his husband is a gluttonous wastrel!* He immediately got up to chase after him, ready to spend some time "educating" his consort on what it meant to disrespect his husband. But before he could get very far, he ran into the two guardians, here to discuss the minutiae of breaking camp, leaving him no choice but to hide his smile and return to the command pavilion with a solemn look on his face.

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ONCE ZHAO MENG HAD LED his detachment to Shengjing Pass, Jing Shao ordered the Shu troops to stand by as they waited for news from Huya Pass. At the same time, Jing Shao himself took the rest of the army of twenty thousand men along with the provisions and equipment toward Shengjing Pass, setting up camp ten miles from its gates.

Shengjing Pass was slotted into a valley, with towering peaks on either side of the narrow and steep path. The pass itself had a wall erected at the narrowest point between the two mountains. It was constructed of thick, heavy blue-gray bricks and reached a height of what felt like a hundred feet, with numerous arrow slits above that one could barely make out people milling about behind. Its heavy wooden gate was tightly closed and deeply recessed beneath the gateway, so deep in fact that the setting sun barely reached it. Only a couple of the rivets occasionally flashed with a metallic glint.

As it was already getting late, Zhao Meng planned on setting up camp for the night to rest and to challenge the pass in the morning. But just as he reined his horse in, a loud rumble sounded and the gates surprisingly opened on their own. The front row of cavalry immediately gripped their spears tight, but even though they waited for a long time, no one came out.

“General, be careful. This might be a trick,” a nearby young officer reminded him quietly.

Zhao Meng frowned and retrieved the first silken pouch from a pocket, tossing it to the young officer. “Read it.”

The officer quickly pulled out the note inside, which had only a single line written on it, and read it aloud: “The opening is a trap; do not pursue a desperate foe.”

The young officer’s voice was loud and clear, and all the lieutenants and commandants around them heard him clearly. They were all astonished and impressed—what a brilliant prediction! What uncanny foresight their strategist possessed!

Zhao Meng let out a derisive huff and called out to the gates. “Surprise, surprise, you Xinan scoundrels are all a bunch of timid mice! You must have been frightened out of your wits when you heard a whole army was coming your way, so you’ve opened the gates to welcome us!”

The soldiers behind him broke into contemptuous laughter and loudly shouted, “Xinan scoundrels! Timid as mice!”

Once they’d jeered long enough, Zhao Meng waved a hand and gave the order. “Make camp!”

Before the logistics team at the back of the army could bring out the tents, however, a squad of cavalry suddenly charged out of the gate.

Seeing that the one leading the group wasn’t a general, Zhao Meng asked his troops, “Who will battle with him?!”

“I will!” said the officer who had read out the silken pouch’s message earlier, stepping out of rank with his spear. He spurred his horse and charged ahead.

The enemy’s lieutenant charged his mount forward; the two steeds galloped like the wind, and the silvery tip of a steel spear clanged against a copper whip in midair, sending sparks flying. At their speed, the exchange

was brief, barely touching as they passed each other by, and the two warriors wheeled their horses around to hurtle toward each other once more.

Soon enough, the young officer had the none-too-skillful enemy's lieutenant restrained.

"Charge!" shouted Zhao Meng, raising his hand, and the eagerly waiting cavalry rushed forward one by one. With battle cries that shook the air, the Xinan army came out to meet them.

Since the path was narrow, few soldiers were able to fight in the vanguard position, and from the point of view of those on the wall, a dense formation of troops had formed a long dragon between the two mountains, with its tail squarely anchored in place and its head slightly extended.

It wasn't long before the Xinan army had to retreat. That was when Zhao Meng realized that the Xinan troops had never gone more than a hundred feet from the gate, so they were able to retreat with such ease that it seemed deliberate. He immediately ordered his troops not to pursue them.

Before the dust had even settled in the wake of their exit, the gate to Shengjing Pass slammed closed once more. Zhao Meng took one look at the few bodies outside the gates, and his temper flared like flames over his heart. This Xinan army had hit and run, and it felt as though all of the momentum of his punch had landed on a great big bag of cotton stuffing, leaving him feeling rather off-kilter.

The Xinan army engaged in this bullying behavior for two successive days, sending a small detachment of troops to lash at them before quickly withdrawing. Once or twice was one thing, but after it happened over and over again, it not only left Zhao Meng seething but the soldiers were also

beginning to feel restless. Trapped on this narrow mountain path, unable to advance, unable to get a good fight in—this was suffocating!

"General, to hell with whatever they're scheming! There's fifty thousand of us—surely we can roll right over this huge wall!" said the cavalry commandant indignantly.

"Yeah, General, what are we waiting for?" shouted the hotheaded young officer.

Just then, another detachment of the Xinan forces emerged from the gate to taunt them once more. Zhao Meng spat derisively, "Damn it! We'll charge in there and crush them!" Raising his saber high above his head, he charged toward the enemy commander who had just led his men out.

The tip of his long-handled saber drew a half circle through the air, now aimed squarely for that man's neck. In counter, the commander flung up his own saber to block, but Zhao Meng's unshakable force held firm against the back of his blade. Metal screeched against metal, a piercing scream only drowned out by the thunderous battle cries and galloping hoofbeats that surrounded them both.

In a flash, a spatter of blood arced out, reaching three feet around them, the general's head hanging from Zhao Meng's hands, torn straight off his shoulders. The army's morale skyrocketed. Without thinking twice, Zhao Meng swung the saber in his hand, and blood droplets scattered off its blade as he cried out: "Charge!"

"Charge!" his soldiers echoed.

They surged forward in a great undulating wave of black armor, and the mud-yellow of the Xinan army uniform was quickly drowned in a black

flood as the slender dragon turned into small snaking lines that began entering the pass.

However, once the charging cavalry passed through the gate, it promptly crashed closed behind them. It split the army in twain and locked out the infantry who hadn't been able to keep up with their general's pace. They were now stranded a hundred feet away.

Arrows began to rain down from the battlements.

The foot soldiers, lacking the cavalry's heavy armor, were helpless against volleys of arrows. As the unfavorability of their situation became clear, the stationed infantry commandant swiftly ordered a retreat.

On the other side of the gate, Zhao Meng was struck by a gut feeling that something was amiss, even before he'd covered much ground into the pass. But by the time he recognized it for what it meant, it was already too late. The world about him went very still for a brief instant, leaving a deafening silence that was only broken by a crow's shrill cry that echoed between the mountains.

The path behind the walls of Shengjing Pass was studded with heavily armed forces.

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"REPOOORT!" The drawn-out call of a messenger interrupted Jing Shao and his strategist while they were drinking tea.

After leaping off his horse, the messenger rushed into the command pavilion, then fell on his knees to prostrate before Jing Shao. “Reporting to the marshal, General Zhao and the cavalry are trapped inside Shengjing Pass without any means of escape. The infantry is stranded outside the pass and is being bombarded by a hail of arrows!”

“That son of a bitch!” Jing Shao hurled his cup to the floor, smashing it. Despite having been told time and time again not to underestimate their opponent, Zhao Meng had messed up almost as soon as he’d left. Jing Shao immediately summoned a commander at the field camp to choose and assemble two hundred horsemen at the front of the camp as soon as possible.

Quickly strapping on his steel armor, which was polished to a silvery sheen, Jing Shao secured his sword to his waist, grabbed a spear, and set off on his way.

“Li’l Spoon!” Mu Hanzhang called out to him urgently. When Jing Shao turned to him, he reached out and tightened Jing Shao’s helmet. “Stay alert and stay safe!”

“Watch over the field camp and await my return.” Jing Shao pressed a kiss to his cheek, then lifted the tent flap to head out. A marshal was supposed to remain at the camp, but he was out of generals, so he had to take care of this himself.

Mu Hanzhang left the tent to see him off. Jing Shao had already mounted Shadow, who reared onto his hind legs with a neigh, signaling the prince’s lead to his two hundred horsemen behind him.

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HIS SILVER-ARMORED FIGURE on his black horse was a streak of lightning that split between the dense black line of his vulnerable infantry.

"What's the situation?" Jing Shao demanded to know as he reined in his horse.

The infantry commandant standing at the front replied, worried, "General Zhao has already been inside for half the day, and there were some loud battle cries at first, but now, everything's gone quiet."

With a furrowed brow, Jing Shao took in the high walls before him. When he'd last attacked Shengjing Pass, Xinan had used this very same "catch a softshell turtle in a jar" trick. The reason he hadn't let Zhao Meng take all of the cavalry was because he was worried that the general would fall for this trick in the heat of the moment, just as he had the last time. Back then, Jing Shao hadn't had any cavalry left and couldn't have ridden here to rescue him, so he had had no choice but to risk taking the shortcut through Huya Pass. This time, since Hao Dadao had gone ahead through Huya Pass, and Zhao Meng had taken two more days before falling into the trap, Jing Shao had arrived early enough and with enough men to have a chance to save him.

On the battlements, a general clad in brass armor called down to him from the gate tower. "To think I'd have the fortune to meet Your Highness Prince Cheng today. What a blessing of three lives indeed!"

"Bow!" Jing Shao eyed the man talking to himself at the top of the tower, grabbed the bow a subordinate handed him, and nocked an arrow.

“Your Highness’s top general is already surrounded, and he’ll be captured in no time. All you have to do is call off your attack…” The lead general finally noticed Prince Cheng pulling back on his bow’s drawstring just before he let loose.

As the general threw himself aside to dodge, the piercing shot grazed his cheek—a near fatal end. Before he even had the chance to consider how he’d barely escaped with his life, a second arrow was already upon him, shocking him into a panicked cower.

Jing Shao would not be giving those on the wall any room to breathe. He raised a hand, signaling for the siege to proceed. “Battering ram!”

High up above, a volley of arrows was swiftly loosed.

“Shields!” Jing Shao waved his hand once more.

A detachment of soldiers, ready with square shields, advanced on the double, bracing their shields before them. They lined up on either side of the battering ram, raising their iron shields high to protect its bearers. As a group, they closed in on the gate at a unified, steady pace.

Panic began to spread over everyone on the wall; during Shengjing Pass’s construction, its gate had accidentally been built with one fatal flaw—it was set too deep into the wall. The instant someone stepped beneath its arch, they were safe from arrows raining down from above.

Boom! The impact of the battering ram against the gate seemed to be ramming against the very hearts of those on the wall—*Boom!*—and fear had them trembling alongside it.

Though any other general might’ve used ladders to climb over the wall as he rammed the gate, Jing Shao instead led his cavalry and remaining

infantry out of the range of the opponent's archers. From there, he casually watched as the rain of arrows clattered uselessly to the ground before him.

Crack! The city gate exploded inward, and the soldiers who'd been ramming into it shouted as they charged through. The Xinan men behind the gate trying to hold it shut were sent flying.

"Forward!" Jing Shao squeezed his horse's belly with his feet, spurring Shadow into a gallop swift as an arrow, and the cavalry behind him followed his advance toward the broken gate.

His infantry could no longer be repelled! Once the cavalry cut down everyone in their path, the footmen surged forward through the gate of Shengjing Pass like a tide.

***

"REPOOORT!" A soldier patrolling near the field camp approached at a gallop and ran into the command pavilion. "Reporting to our strategist, more than a thousand troops are advancing toward our camp, and they're already no more than three miles away!"

"What?!" The Right Guardian, who was playing with the tiger cub, sprang to his feet at this news. While their elite forces were out in the field, there were less than twenty thousand people left at the base camp—and a fifth of them were in logistics. Hardly any of their cavalry remained at the camp. Even should they somehow manage to kill a thousand troops, they would still no doubt take heavy casualties.

“Master Jun, go stay with Leftie—make sure not to leave his side no matter what!” the Right Guardian said. He donned his armor and turned to leave the tent.

Chapter 53:
Crisis

"WAIT!" MU HANZHANG'S VOICE followed the Right Guardian out, and he began speaking rapidly. "I've already had wooden stakes installed all around the base camp. Quickly, get the soldiers to fasten horse-tripping ropes to the stakes."

After a stunned moment, the Right Guardian rushed out.

Mu Hanzhang turned to the Left Guardian. "How well do infantry fare against cavalry?"

"Cavalry is all about speed. Three infantrymen are a match for one horseman," the Left Guardian replied calmly.

Mu Hanzhang gave a slight nod at his words. "If it's just a matter of numbers, we have a good chance of coming out on top, but the one thing we must prevent at all costs is the enemy's surprise attack on the base camp causing panic. The Right Guardian is rash. You should quickly mobilize the troops and station them in eight directions behind the tripping ropes. The camp is in the shape of a square, 170 yards on each side."

The Left Guardian clasped his hands together and saluted. "Understood!"

***

ZHAO MENG HAD JUST LED his troops through the gate of Shengjing Pass when the gate had shut behind them, cornering them like beaten dogs. A great number of enemy foot soldiers—armed with scimitars specifically made for hacking at the legs of horses—had darted out of the hills, forcing Zhao Meng's cavalry to keep moving ahead as they fought. Little did he know that not only were there troops stationed along the path in great numbers, but numerous perils awaited them—falling boulders, traps, spikes; their enemy was using every trick in the book to cause them great suffering.

"General!" The cavalry commandant grabbed Zhao Meng and helped him to his feet. They had just passed through a rolling stone trap, and even Zhao Meng was now wounded, so they'd stopped to rest for a moment. "We've traveled for such a long time yet covered less than four miles. What should we do?"

Zhao Meng was panting. There were ambushes ahead and pursuers behind, making both advance and retreat unfeasible. Suddenly, he recalled what Master Jun had told him before he left and immediately reached into his pocket for the second silken pouch. When he unfolded the paper, it said: *The sea of suffering is boundless; turn back and you will find the shore.*

"What does this mean?" the cavalry commandant asked, utterly bewildered; why would Master Jun give them a Buddhist platitude in the midst of a crisis? How were they meant to interpret it?

Zhao Meng rubbed a hand over his bushy beard and carefully contemplated his current situation. This was clearly a "catching turtles in a jar" trap set by King Xinan to capture him. Since Master Jun had left him this message, it must have meant he knew that Zhao Meng would fall for it, and this was a reminder for him to turn back before it was too late. The infantry

was still outside the gates, and the army could not afford to squander its cavalry. He needed to go back and retrieve his infantry.

Finally managing to calm down, Zhao Meng swiftly mounted his horse. “Everyone, heed my command—we return to Shengjing Pass posthaste!”

***

AS JING SHAO RODE through the open gate into Shengjing Pass, a squad of Xinan soldiers rushed out of the hills.

He tightened his hold on his reins and shouted, “Cavalry on the vanguard, infantry close behind, blades drawn!” As he projected his voice with his inner force, his words resonated like a great bell, striking fear into the hearts of the Xinan troops.

Shadow reared up on his hind legs, let out a piercing whinny, and sped to gallop ahead of the pack. The chargers behind him accelerated as they tried to keep up.

The foot soldiers trailing them followed his orders; those wielding spears immediately retreated while those armed with sabers took several quick steps to the side. They drew their blades, pointing them at the enemies who were charging downhill with unstoppable force. However, their enemies’ scimitars were specialized for cutting the legs of horses, and they were no match against sharpened broad sabers. The Xinan troops at the front of their charge ran directly into the ends of Jing Shao’s infantry’s sabers.

All at once, screams echoed through the pass, and the sky above seemed to be covered in a fine mist of blood!

The head of the dragon-shaped line of infantry was made up of Jing Shao's Vanguard Battalion, so they followed his orders without question and coordinated with each other seamlessly. The saber-wielding foot soldier cut down the foremost enemy before falling back, then the spear-wielding infantry promptly stepped into the gap to keep the scimitar-wielders in check. With how narrow the mountain path was, few soldiers could directly face the enemy, but the Xinan troops, vainly attempting triumph through cunning, did not have numbers on their side.

Jing Shao's battlefield moved with him, fighting as he marched, and he carved a path of corpses. Scattered ahead of him were rubble, abandoned armor, and caltrops; Shadow was intelligent enough to know how to avoid obstacles on his own, but the other chargers had no such ability.

Aware of this, he reined in his horse and ordered his troops to clear the battlefield, and it wasn't long before they spotted a dust cloud down the pass as Zhao Meng arrived with his detachment of cavalry, looking rather the worse for wear.

"Your Highness!" Zhao Meng shouted, overjoyed at the sight of his marshal.

Jing Shao regarded him icily, eyeing the damage to Zhao Meng's armor that likely indicated he was injured. "You will return to our field camp immediately. Once I've flattened Shengjing Pass, I'll come back to deal with you!"

Zhao Meng's face turned pale. He dismounted and got on his knees. "I was reckless, and I'm willing to accept any punishment, but Your Highness,

as the marshal, you should be guarding the main camp. I earnestly ask that you give me another chan—"

"Repooort!" Before Zhao Meng could finish, a messenger on a fast horse cut through the crowd, the entire army splitting to make way.

"Reporting to the marshal, over a thousand horsemen have launched a surprise attack on our main field camp!" the messenger relayed to him, panic heavy in his voice.

"What?!" Jing Shao's eyes widened; he felt as though lightning had just struck him. All of their cavalry had been deployed, and a surprise attack on the main camp would surely lead to heavy casualties. On top of that, his Junqing was there!

"Your Highness, there's little use in cavalry on these mountain paths. I will lead the infantry and go on ahead!" Zhao Meng said, taking this opportunity to rise to his feet.

After giving him a long, deep look, Jing Shao wheeled his horse around. "Cavalry, heed my command. We return to camp at once!" Then, without another word, he left with most of the cavalry in tow.

***

MU HANZHANG STOOD OUTSIDE the command pavilion peering into the near distance. A billowing dust cloud approached, bringing with it a hostile presence.

As he'd predicted, the raiders weren't concentrating their forces and had instead split into three to attack from the east, south, and west, all taking separate wedge formations. They were moving so fast that they immediately tripped over the ropes; the first line of horses stumbled, and those following behind crashed over them, tumbling down too, filling the air with the sound of their agonized neighing.

The camp's eight units of foot soldiers soon merged into six, quietly looking on as the horses fell.

Before long, their opponents in the rear noticed the ropes and slowed their pace. One, two, then ten… More and more enemy horsemen vaulted their steeds over the ropes. From their perches on horseback, they slashed their sabers down at the trap, cutting the ropes down, and those behind them followed suit.

Soon, all of the ropes were severed. Like a flowing torrent slipping through one's fingers, the enemy troops turned into icicles to pierce through the infantry formation. The sudden sound of warfare shook the heavens.

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JING SHAO SPURRED SHADOW on with a whip. *Faster, faster!* He dared not distract himself by thinking about where these people might have come from, nor did he dare imagine what kind of situation Junqing might be caught up in at this very moment.

Shadow sensed his master's urgency and charged forward at a wild gallop, racing on ahead and leaving the other troops far, far behind.

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CAVALRY ACTUALLY DIDN'T HAVE that much of an advantage over infantry, and even if one horseman was a match for three infantrymen, it would still lead to enormous losses. Mu Hanzhang watched the way these enemy combatants charged in recklessly with no regard for their lives and couldn't help but wonder—why were they doing this?

Something whistled through the air, startling Mu Hanzhang, and he automatically sidestepped. An arrow shot through the spot where he'd just been, whizzing right through the fabric of the command pavilion. These soldiers weren't cavalry…

He looked up to find the sky full of arrows—they were mounted archers!

Whilst there was little advantage to pitting cavalry against infantry, if they were mounted archers instead, the lethality of their arrows would significantly increase the number of casualties in the camp. Soldiers who could both ride and shoot well were elite troops. Since King Xinan had invested so heavily in invading the main camp, he must have had a goal, and this goal was…

Countless arrows barreled toward the command pavilion. Perhaps… their goal was him! He spun on his heel and sprinted toward a more crowded area of the battlefield—arrows weren't good at close range, so the closer he was to them, the less likely he would get hurt.

From the thick of soldiers, the Right Guardian spotted Mu Hanzhang running from the volley of projectiles. “Master Jun, watch out!”

Mu Hanzhang narrowly avoided a stray arrow, and the Right Guardian pulled him close, handing him a short saber. “Don’t leave my side!”

The spear of a soldier on horseback shot out toward Mu Hanzhang, and he raised his weapon to block it. With a swift swing of his blade, the Right Guardian severed the soldier’s outstretched arm, then kicked at the horse’s belly.

“Ah!” The rider let out a miserable cry as he fell off the horse, and infantry nearby delivered the finishing blow.

“Master Jun, you really are a polymath!” The Right Guardian had only given Mu Hanzhang a dagger as a precaution and hadn’t expected their strategist to know how to wield it. His blade technique was precise and his moves concise and efficient. Though he lacked support from an inner force, his skill was undeniable.

Mu Hanzhang smirked, but he didn’t respond, moving to stand back-to-back with the Right Guardian. The fragility of his meridians had left him unable to practice martial arts, but it didn’t hinder him from training in the techniques themselves. As a means to prevent himself from becoming a perpetual invalid and out of a genuine longing for martial arts, Mu Hanzhang often secretly watched his father practice the sword and spear, memorizing each move he made, and he would practice in his own courtyard in the evenings in secret. Over time, he’d managed to hone some life-saving techniques, and his health had gradually improved as a result.

The advantage of a surprise cavalry attack was in its speed and ferocity. Now that their advance had been slowed and they couldn’t find their

target, they were overwhelmed by the sea of infantry. Their fighting spirit gradually diminished, and they were at last eliminated one by one.

Just as Mu Hanzhang breathed a sigh of relief, he heard hoofbeats approaching again nearby. His chest instantly tightened, but when he looked up, he saw the black horse and silvery armor of a man riding in from the horizon with a cloud of dust behind him. A smile tugged at Mu Hanzhang's tightly pressed lips—his Li'l Spoon was back!

Jing Shao spurred his steed on, making a beeline for the camp. As he got closer and closer to the chaos that had enveloped it, a man clad in cyan standing among dark-armored soldiers grew increasingly conspicuous. The bloodstained dagger in his hand gave the illusion of a flute when held by Mu Hanzhang.

When Jing Shao saw him safe and sound, his heart finally settled back into place from its perch in his throat. He couldn't help but grin as he galloped toward his consort. There was no way for him to foresee what was about to happen. A mounted soldier leaped out from behind a tent, his saber raised above the cyan-clad Mu Hanzhang.

"Junqing!" Jing Shao felt as though his heart had been yanked up to a great height.

He could only watch helplessly as the giant long-handled saber bore down on his defenseless wife. Blood flew, and for Jing Shao, all the color drained out of the world, leaving nothing but a slash of vivid crimson.

“No!” Roaring, Jing Shao rushed forward, drew the long sword at his waist, and with a clean stroke, lopped off the head of Mu Hanzhang’s assailant, his blood spurting into the air! Shadow reared up and kicked away his opponent’s horse, revealing the person hidden behind it.

“Master Jun!” The Right Guardian turned his head, and letting out an alarmed and angry howl, he reached out to stop his fall—yet he was too slow.

Someone else had caught him. Jing Shao pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms, having sprung off his horse to make it in time, his eyes bloodshot, his voice trembling. “Junqing, Junqing!”

Mu Hanzhang grunted and clutched his injured shoulder. Blood gushed through his slender fingers. The corner of his blanching lips curved, and he said, “It’s just a flesh wound. Don’t panic… Hey!”

Staring at the blood oozing through Junqing’s hands, Jing Shao felt such pain in his heart that he didn’t know what to do with himself. He scooped Mu Hanzhang up into his arms and went straight for the royal tent, shouting, “Get the military physician, quick!”

Now that he no longer needed to worry about protecting the strategist, the Right Guardian raised his saber and swore. “You motherfuckers. How dare you hurt our strategist?! Kill them all!”

“Chaaarge!” The soldiers, hearing this command, rushed toward the last few horsemen.

“Junqing…” Jing Shao kept calling the name of the man in his arms lest he should faint dead away.

“Li’l Spoon, I’m fine. Don’t be afraid.” Mu Hanzhang leaned into his embrace.

The wound was shallow, and he'd intended to laugh at this man for making a fuss over nothing, but he could feel a slight trembling in the arms holding him and ultimately could not find it in himself to make light of his reaction. Instead, he held Jing Shao's hand in his own bloodstained hand, gently reassuring him.

Chapter 54:
Plain Noodles

JING SHAO CLUNG TO MU HANZHANG, the memories of their past in that prison cell flashing before his eyes, sending waves of fear through him. He was terrified at what could have happened. If he had been just one step slower, that saber might have sent his Junqing straight to the afterlife.

"Your Highness, the doctor is here." The Right Guardian ran into the tent, tugging the military physician behind him, only to be met by the sight of the strategist lying in His Highness's arms—a position that couldn't be interpreted as anything but highly intimate!

The Left Guardian entered immediately after him, and when he saw the Right Guardian's thunderstruck expression, he immediately elbowed him.

Mu Hanzhang released Jing Shao's hand, noticing other people had come into the tent.

Shooting a look at the military physician, Jing Shao said, "Get over here already!"

Since a prince was leading this expedition, the Academy of Medicine had assigned a younger imperial physician to march with the army; Jing Shao had some faith in such a doctor's medical skills.

"Certainly!" The doctor promptly approached, setting his medicine case down nearby, then after a quick once-over at Mu Hanzhang's condition, he reached out to pull his lapel open.

"What are you doing?!" Jing Shao grabbed the hand stretching toward

his consort and glared at the doctor with wide, bloodshot eyes.

"Your— Your Highness, this one…must open the strategist's collar to check his wound," the doctor stammered, startled by the prince's pointed glare.

Displeasure simmered in Jing Shao—how could he let someone else see his consort's body?! But it wasn't as if there were a way around this, since treating his wound was priority. Jing Shao took a deep breath and started untying Mu Hanzhang's robes himself.

There was a huge slice in the fabric above the wound, and the drying blood stuck his robes to the injury, pulling at it when he tugged on the material. Mu Hanzhang couldn't hold back a gasp of pain.

Jing Shao's hand halted at once, then he carefully picked up a corner of the fabric where it was torn and quickly peeled away the cloth that covered his collarbone. Underneath, skin stained red with fresh blood, was a gruesome almost four-inch-long cut that stretched from shoulder to clavicle, blood still seeping from it.

Intimidated by Prince Cheng's aura, the doctor was too afraid to touch Mu Hanzhang again. He leaned in to examine the wound carefully instead. "Your Highness, it seems he fortunately dodged out of the way in time, and this cut neither damaged any tendons nor internal organs. All it needs is a poultice and some bandaging."

They didn't have any good medicinal ingredients in camp, and it wasn't like this strategist was some fragile noble or member of the imperial family, so he didn't suggest decocting a blood-replenishing tonic or anything along those lines.

Jing Shao stared at Mu Hanzhang's wan, handsome face, his distress so intense he could barely stand it. The wound was long, but they'd still have to march again in a few days—the bumpy ride meant the wound would take more time to heal.

When the military physician noticed that His Highness showed no particular reaction to his diagnosis, he produced the vulnerary powder for sword wounds out of his medicine case.

"Tell the guards to bring a basin of hot water. Everyone out." Jing Shao snatched the medicine jar out of his hand, leaving no chance for the doctor to suggest applying it for him, and waved everyone out.

Once he'd placed Mu Hanzhang gently down on the bed, Jing Shao got up to get the supplies. That was when he noticed the Right Guardian and Left Guardian standing there like two statues. His face immediately fell. "The base camp is in chaos right now; what are you two still standing around for?"

"I will take my leave." The Left Guardian apologized immediately and dragged the Right Guardian out of the tent.

"Leftie, why do I feel like there's something…um, going on between His Highness and Master Jun?" The Right Guardian scratched his head, troubled.

The Left Guardian shot a look at him and continued to pull him along.

"Hey, come on, why are you ignoring me?" The Right Guardian raised a foot to kick the Left Guardian on the butt as they walked, but since the Left Guardian was holding on to his arm, his legs were too long to get at the right angle.

“His Highness can hear you here,” said the Left Guardian expressionlessly.

“Oh!” the Right Guardian cried out in alarm, then quickened his pace and tugged the Left Guardian away.

Jing Shao soaked a small sheet of soft silk in warm water, then carefully wiped away the blood around the wound. He didn’t apply the powder the military physician had given him and instead took out a small jade-green bottle. While this balm wouldn’t heal him, it would dull the pain from the wound and stop the bleeding quickly.

“Don’t you still have some of that ointment from Xiyu? Let’s use that.” Mu Hanzhang reached out with his uninjured right arm to still Jing Shao’s actions.

They were in a critical moment in the war, and they could break camp at any moment. Although what Jing Shao was holding was a good ointment, it didn’t accelerate healing. On the other hand, the salve that Jing Shao had once used on Mu Hanzhang’s lower lip the day after their wedding had helped heal his wound quicker—using it would mean his injury wouldn’t affect their march.

“No way!” Jing Shao refused without a second thought. After washing his hands in warm water, he poured some of the translucent salve from the jade-green bottle onto his fingertips and gently applied it to Mu Hanzhang’s wound. “That one amplifies pain. You wouldn’t be able to bear it.”

The cooling salve immediately alleviated the stinging and burning of his injury, and Mu Hanzhang closed his eyes, slowly letting out a breath.

Bending down, Jing Shao pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek as he fought against the pricking in his own eyes. He bandaged Mu Hanzhang’s

wound with expert efficiency, then tucked him in under the blankets.

Mu Hanzhang turned his head to find Jing Shao's eyes full of distress. "I'm fine. You go back to what you were doing."

Jing Shao took Mu Hanzhang's hand that lay outside the blankets, gently caressing his fingers over and over in his palm. But he neither got up to leave nor spoke.

He'd never once thought that getting to live his life again meant everything would go his way, but this had only happened due to his arrogance. Now that the fight with the vassal kings had begun three years earlier, a lot of things were going to be different. How King Xinan and King Dongnan thought and what approach they might take would differ as well. For instance, the mounted archers that attacked them today were King Dongnan's secret weapon. For him to lend them to King Xinan was something Jing Shao had never considered a possibility.

Jing Shao lifted Mu Hanzhang's hand and rested the back of it against his own cheek. He had long since given up on the throne and the empire; they weren't what he wanted anymore. All he wanted from this lifetime was to spend it next to Junqing. If he lost this man, what was even the point of reliving this life again?

The warm softness in his hand suddenly gripped his in return, startling Jing Shao back into the present. He looked up at Mu Hanzhang.

Seeing how depressed Jing Shao seemed, like a wounded cub holding on to its only possession, unwilling to let go, Mu Hanzhang felt his heart ache for him. He let himself smile and said, "Go help me track down Li'l Sunbeam. Things got pretty chaotic earlier. I wouldn't want him to get lost."

Jing Shao forced a smile and, nodding, he got up to go locate the tiger cub. Junqing had no idea how much it tugged at his heart to see him smile with those bloodless lips.

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IT TOOK HIM HALF A DAY of searching before he managed to find the tiger cub hidden in the gaps between some boxes. Jing Shao shook the dusty gray lump in his hand disdainfully, then left him for a soldier to bathe while he went off to handle other affairs in camp.

After a careful examination of the clothes and weapons on the dead mounted archers, Jing Shao was doubly sure that they belonged to King Dongnan's troops. He could understand why they would launch a surprise attack on the camp while the army was gone, but what was perplexing was why they'd targeted a budding strategist.

"We didn't leave a single survivor?" Jing Shao frowned.

"Those mounted archers were too fearless and aggressive; we couldn't afford to let any live." The Right Guardian was still haunted by the image of that archer's blade coming down on Master Jun with such focus that he'd left no room for defense—he'd never seen anyone leave all of their weak spots open just for the sake of the killing blow.

"Repair the tents carefully, and build another layer of fortifications outside our camp's perimeter. Add an extra patrol shift at night." Jing Shao took the casualty report the Left Guardian handed him and dismissed the two with a wave.

The guard came in to deliver the washed and dried tiger cub, and once Jing Shao had finished reading the documents he had on hand, he picked up Li'l Sunbeam and returned to the royal tent.

The man lying on the bed was already asleep. Twilight shone through the bed veil onto his still too pale face. Perhaps because his wound pained him, Mu Hanzhang was not sleeping soundly, and there was a slight furrow between his brows.

"Raaaaaahr!" The tiger cub, who had had quite an afternoon of rough handling, let out an excited cry when he finally saw his master.

"Shh…" Jing Shao bopped the cub on the head, trying to impress silence on him, but the furball in his hand didn't understand what he meant at all and squirmed in his arms as he attempted to bolt to his master.

The man on the bed slowly opened his eyes. When he saw the two in a standoff, he couldn't help but smile as he eased himself upright.

"Don't move!" Jing Shao immediately stepped forward to prop him up while the tiger cub took the opportunity to jump onto the bed. He rolled over the quilt and leaped onto Mu Hanzhang's leg to claw at the blanket.

Soon after, a soldier came in carrying two bowls. "Master Jun, the noodles are ready."

"Why did you suddenly want to have noodles?" Jing Shao raised an eyebrow.

Junqing preferred rice and didn't often have noodles. As he brought one bowl over, Mu Hanzhang went to take it, but Jing Shao pulled it out of his reach. "I'll feed you."

Mu Hanzhang's face flashed red. "It's my shoulder that's injured. It won't get in the way." He was twenty years old—how could he allow someone else to feed him?!

"No way." When he noticed the blush climbing over Mu Hanzhang's pale face, Jing Shao's mood inevitably improved. He smiled and picked up a mouthful of steaming noodles with the chopsticks, holding it up next to Mu Hanzhang's mouth. "Hurry. Eat it while it's hot."

Mu Hanzhang had no choice but to open his mouth to take a bite and then watched, wide-eyed, as Jing Shao ate up the remaining noodles off the same chopsticks.

"Your—Your Highness…" Mu Hanzhang stared at him blankly.

Jing Shao happily nuzzled his cheek against his consort's stunned face, then continued to eat the rest of the noodles with relish, sharing every bite. Even though the meal was only plain noodles with vegetables, Jing Shao thought they were the best noodles he had ever tasted in his life.

When the tiger cub in his arms saw them eating, he climbed on Jing Shao's arm and stood up on his hind legs, sticking his furry face into the bowl. Jing Shao stuffed half a noodle into his mouth, and he gave it one chew before spitting it out with disdain.

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AS NIGHT FELL, due to the chaos during the day, the camp didn't quiet down completely. The grounds were still quite hectic with activity.

Mu Hanzhang lay in Jing Shao's arms with a slight furrow between his brows. The pain from his injury made it impossible for him to sleep, and so he slowly sat up.

Jing Shao woke up with a start when he felt his arms empty. When he saw that Mu Hanzhang was still by his side, he breathed out a sigh of relief and sat up too. "Junqing, what's the matter?"

"I can't sleep. Let's go for a walk by the river," Mu Hanzhang said as he got out of bed to change. He hung the green jade flute on his belt.

Jing Shao stared at him in a daze for a moment. Worried that he would reopen his wound, he went over to help him put on his outer robe. While he had no idea why his consort wanted to get some fresh air by the river in the middle of the night, the inside of his head was a mess, and his sleep had also been restless, so he figured he might as well join him for a walk.

There was a river right behind the camp, as access to one was a necessity for army camps. Moonlight spilled onto the shallow water, shining onto the pebbles at the bottom of the stream.

The two walked hand in hand by the shore for only a little while before a cold sweat broke out over Mu Hanzhang's forehead, forcing him to take a break. He sat down on a rock.

Jing Shao wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Don't walk anymore. Once you've rested here for a while, I'll carry you back."

Mu Hanzhang took a deep breath, then looked up and smiled at him. "Do you know what day it is today?"

"What day is it?" Jing Shao paused and looked up at the waning moon but couldn't for the life of him remember what was so special about today.

Mu Hanzhang smiled without speaking and took the jade flute from his belt. “Let me play a song for you, then.”

Chapter 55:
The Nine Chapters of Xiao-Shao

"SURE!" JING SHAO REPLIED, pleased.

He had placed a famed zither in the little study precisely because he was waiting for a time when Junqing might find his soul unburdened enough to play a song if the mood struck. But unfortunately, he hadn't ended up hearing him play the zither, let alone the sound of this jade xiao flute.

Mu Hanzhang glanced at the inexplicably excited Jing Shao, smiled helplessly, and placed the end of the green jade instrument up to his pale lips.

The flute wept in the serenity of the moonlit night, singing with a sense of sorrow that felt as old as time. Its melody was even and gentle, like the wind passing through a boundless forest, and it rose and fell as though it were the moon reflecting off a calm river.

Jing Shao didn't know much about music, but this didn't hinder him from understanding this melody, because his eyes never left the flautist—not even for a moment. Moonlight cascaded onto the pale cyan gauze of his robes, his lithe, slender fingers dancing over the flute, his skin even smoother than the jade the instrument was made from.

The shimmering ripples on the water illuminated his incomparably handsome face, and along with the flute melody, Jing Shao thought he could see a blue phoenix dancing beneath the moon, gliding gracefully through the trees, soaring up to the highest reaches of the sky.

When the flute's song came to an abrupt halt, Jing Shao was far from having had his fill, and he protested, "Why did you stop?"

Mu Hanzhang looked up at him. “What did you hear?”

“A blue phoenix, soaring high until it was above the clouds. What happens after that?” Jing Shao frowned. Hearing a story half told sat poorly with him.

Mu Hanzhang stared at him, surprised. “You actually managed to get that much from it?”

This was an ancient melody, passed down from antiquity, and its story was so obscure and difficult to understand that even a master of the zither might not be able to comprehend as much from the melody, never mind those who didn’t know much about music.

Jing Shao never thought he’d somehow managed to interpret its true meaning and smiled proudly despite himself.

“The ancients said that riches are plentiful but kindred spirits are rare, and if you meet someone who is your soulmate, then even if they were a fisherman or a farmer, they could still understand your melody. What I know is not the melody but the one who played it.” As he spoke, he reached out and took a lock of silken dark hair between his fingers.

Mu Hanzhang lowered his eyes. Under the moonlight, his cheeks flushed slightly. “Then do you know what the song is called?”

Jing Shao scratched his head. How was he supposed to know that? And so, he sat down next to his consort, pulled him into his arms, and leaned in to whisper into his ear. “My guess is *A Phoenix Seeking Its Mate*.[4]”

Mu Hanzhang glared at him. “That’s hogwa—” His lips were sealed with a kiss before he could finish, and whatever he was about to say turned into a hum.

It was but a brief brush of lips, and the two of them slowly parted once Mu Hanzhang was calm again. Jing Shao caressed Mu Hanzhang’s cheek. “There is this beauty, one glimpse and he is etched in my soul; a single day without him, and I am lost in longing.[5]” His voice had a magnetic quality, and his tone rose and fell like a melody; it was utterly captivating.

Mu Hanzhang looked at him quietly, and slowly, a smile spread across his face. “This piece is called *Xiao-Shao*. A long, long time ago, there used to be nine chapters of it, but only three chapters have survived history.”

So, that was an incomplete piece. Jing Shao nodded. No wonder it felt unfinished.

Aware that Jing Shao still wasn’t getting it, Mu Hanzhang sighed, resigned. “Today is the 19th of the Ninth Month.”

The 19th of the Ninth Month? Jing Shao’s eyes immediately widened. Wasn’t that his birthday?!

Ever since his mother had passed away, apart from the routine gifts he received from the palace every year, he really hadn’t properly celebrated his birthday. In his past life, he’d spent years away from home on military campaigns, so by now he’d forgotten all about even having a birthday. To think his consort had actually remembered, and he hadn’t forgotten to get him a bowl of longevity noodles even while he himself had been wounded.

“Junqing…” Jing Shao gazed down at the man in his arms. Everything that had happened today was all piling up; he felt suddenly overwhelmed and

unsure.

"You're twenty today, but there's no time to go back to the capital for your coming-of-age crowning ceremony…" Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together.

The crowning ceremony of a prince was of utmost importance, and the extent of its grandeur decided a prince's chance of inheriting the throne. Jing Shao had already lost his right to succession, however, so whether or not they performed the crowning ceremony had become irrelevant.

"I was already given a crown when I got conferred the title of imperial prince." Jing Shao noticed the sympathy in his consort's eyes, and a wave of warmth filled his chest. "But I still lack a courtesy name, so why don't you come up with one for me?"

The imperial family didn't actually have courtesy names, as no one used the names of those in the imperial family to begin with, making them unnecessary. Asking Junqing to come up with one for him was only so that his consort would have something playful to call him in private.

Mu Hanzhang leaned back against Jing Shao's chest. He didn't seem upset, so Mu Hanzhang quietly admonished himself for worrying too much. Smiling, he said, "The nine variations of the Xiao-Shao melody herald the arrival of the phoenix. So why don't we put nine and Xiao together and call you 'Jiuxiao'?"

"Jiuxiao…" Jing Shao said carefully, savoring the name.

"The nine variations of the Xiao-Shao melody herald the arrival of the phoenix"... When his father and mother had named him Shao, they must have hoped that he would be like the divine Xiao-Shao melody that summoned the phoenix, bringing peace and prosperity to the Chen Empire,

rather than a dragon that coveted the throne. His future had already been set from the moment he was born; when his father had bestowed him with the title Prince Cheng, was he not also reminding him of this fact? But alas, he'd never truly understood their intentions.

"What's the matter? Did I say something wrong?" Nervousness pooled inside Mu Hanzhang as he noticed the troubled look on Jing Shao's face. His interpretation of the origin of Jing Shao's name was mere speculation on his part—he didn't actually know where it had come from. If he'd accidentally touched upon something painful for Jing Shao, then it wasn't worth it.

"No, I'm sure Mother thought about it the same way back then." Jing Shao smiled and looked up at the moon above him. If his mother were watching him from the heavens, she would certainly be heartened to see him as he was now.

Though the onset of autumn in the south remained as sweltering as midsummer, the evening breeze, brushing his face with the fragrance of nameless flowers, brought a touch of coolness. Jing Shao took a deep breath. Junqing had done so much for him, so he had to repay him somehow. And so, he lowered his head and said to Mu Hanzhang with a grin, "Actually, I know how to play the flute too."

"Really?" Mu Hanzhang was beyond surprised—he hadn't heard anything about Prince Cheng learning musical theory before, and when he saw the suggestive grin on Jing Shao's face, he said suspiciously, "You're not bluffing, are you?"

"Well, you'll find out whether I'm bluffing soon enough," said Jing Shao, seemingly quite confident.

And so, a few moments later…

“Um…this is hardly…” Mu Hanzhang’s complaint was interspersed with moans. Jing Shao’s actions had forced him to tilt his head back, and he was panting heavily.

Jing Shao raised his head from his work and chuckled. “So, what do you think about This Prince’s flute-playing skills?”

“You’re…” Looking down at the man buried between his legs, Mu Hanzhang was so stunned that he couldn’t even speak. Jing Shao was such a proud man, yet he was willing to lower his head for him, doing things that a husband should never do!

Jing Shao pressed a kiss to Mu Hanzhang’s cock, then picked up the blushing man and set him down gently on the grass by the river. “If you can’t tell whether I’m any good yet, do wait until I finish playing this particular tune before delivering your judgment.”

Slowly, Mu Hanzhang’s hands grasped into tight fists, clenching at the grass under him, and only then did it dawn on him—they were by the river! To do such a thing under the open sky was truly embarrassing.

“Don’t… Not here…” His protests quickly turned into a moan as the warmth that enveloped him suddenly deepened, forcing his words to lose all meaning.

The stars in his eyes flickered; in this serene wilderness, the sensations of his body seemed to multiply. Mu Hanzhang had never felt this with such clarity before, making it impossible to resist wanting more, despite knowing that they could be discovered at any moment.

Mu Hanzhang reached out with trembling hands and stroked the head between his thighs. All of the devotion and love he felt in such a tender

gesture had filled his heart to bursting. At this moment, only one thought was left in his mind; he wanted him, wanted to be one with him completely.

"Li'l Spoon…"

Hearing this soft summons from the man before him, Jing Shao paused in his ministrations and climbed up to kiss Mu Hanzhang's cheek, but to his surprise, Mu Hanzhang looped his arms over the back of Jing Shao's neck! Was Junqing perhaps…taking the initiative?

Jing Shao, who had intended to stop after getting a little taste, lost his mind completely at the feeling of those hands clasping around his neck. He caught those half-parted lips at once, sealing them together with his. His last remaining shred of rationality told him that the man in his arms was still injured, that he shouldn't go too far.

"It still hurts a little, so be gentle…" Mu Hanzhang whispered, his teeth grazing the ear of the man on top of him.

He didn't know what had come over him either; perhaps it was because Jing Shao's heartfelt passion had infected him, causing him to lose control, or perhaps the mayhem from earlier today made him long to wash away the bloody, traumatic memories in his head, or perhaps he was simply following his own heart.

Jing Shao's body was in the throes of youth still; his desire grew like flames over dry tinder. How could he possibly withstand such intimate whispers?

If Jing Shao could keep on holding back after hearing that, then he wouldn't even be a man anymore!

Taking a box about the size of a walnut from his pouch, Jing Shao opened it, a familiar fragrance wafting forth.

Mu Hanzhang glared at him, blushing, unable to believe he was actually walking around with something like that on him.

The cool salve was slowly kneaded into his entrance, and Jing Shao effortlessly found that adorable spot, massaging and circling it. At the same time, he bent down and once again took Mu Hanzhang's neglected erect cock into his mouth. Only once the man beneath him had melted like a lake during spring thaw did he stop the preparatory probing of his fingers. He held on to that slender waist and thrust in.

Mu Hanzhang bit his lip, enduring this sensation, both painful and pleasurable. Even though the cut on his shoulder hurt, even though the grass beneath him was nowhere near as soft as a bed, this was the most wonderful he'd ever felt in all the times they had lain together. It was as if he'd broken free from all of his shackles, and he was melding together with Jing Shao with a pure heart.

The scent of fresh grass in Jing Shao's nose, every expression that passed over the face of the man in his arms under the moonlight, that slightly furrowed brow, those eyes holding back tears, the mark he was biting into his lower lip, the blush that spread over his body, even the silk wrapped around his shoulder—everything was beautiful beyond compare, making Jing Shao lose control over the pace of his movements.

It took a long time before Jing Shao finally came back to himself from their exhilarating coupling. He pressed a soothing kiss to the man who was still trembling from the aftershocks of his climax and slowly withdrew. It inevitably elicited a series of soft, fragmented moans.

“Does your wound hurt?” After rinsing off with river water, Jing Shao sat on the grass and pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms, unwrapping the soft silk on his shoulder to check it.

“It’s fine…” Mu Hanzhang’s whole body was sore and weak, bonelessly leaning against him.

“Damn it, it’s bleeding.” Watching the barely healed wound beginning to ooze blood again, Jing Shao was immediately overcome with remorse. He picked up Mu Hanzhang and headed toward his tent.

“That’s why we should switch to the other ointment. In a few days, when we have to break camp and move, it’ll probably just open up again.” Mu Hanzhang draped himself over one broad shoulder drowsily. After all of that, even if he was in a bit of pain, he’d be able to fall fast asleep. He yawned and said, his voice thick, “Let’s go sleep in the strategist’s tent so that I won’t be seen in the royal tent in the morning.”

Jing Shao recalled that the meddlesome tiger was still in his own tent and considered him yet another reason not to head back there. He turned toward the strategist’s tent next to it. There was medicine there too.

Once Jing Shao had laid him down on the bed, he went and retrieved the jade-green bottle. “Let’s keep using this for now. We’ll see how it looks tomorrow.” He was reluctant to use the Xiyu healing salve on Junqing unless it was absolutely necessary. It was such a deep wound—how painful would it be to put that on it?

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THE NIGHT WAS QUIET. The voices and noises of the camp had faded away entirely, leaving only the footsteps of the patrolling guards and the occasional chirping of insects.

A dark shadow crept up to the royal tent, and, crouched, it gently lifted the lower corner of the tent flap before soundlessly crawling forward. When it reached the edge of the bed, it retrieved the dagger it was holding in its mouth and sprang up, stabbing hard into—into nobody! Surprised, the would-be assassin was about to retreat when something sharp suddenly scratched their hand. Thinking that they'd fallen to an ambush, they let out a startled cry of alarm.

"Who's there?!" The guard patrolling nearby rushed in at the sound, his torch illuminating the entirety of the tent, including the panic-stricken assassin as well as the little furball in the blankets.

"Raaah!" Li'l Sunbeam was quite cross with the man who'd woken him up. He bared his teeth at him then sat back down to take his time licking his bloodstained paws.

Chapter 56:
News of Victory

THE ASSASSIN WAS caught red-handed. Torches were soon lit all around the royal tent, and the two guardians swiftly rushed to the scene, fearful something might have happened to the prince. And then, they watched the prince, who ought to have been sleeping in the royal tent, saunter calmly out of the strategist's tent.

The Right Guardian was flabbergasted.

The Left Guardian stared in his habitually quiet manner.

The Right Guardian laughed dryly. "Such masterful planning from our strategist!"

The Left Guardian let out an acknowledging "Mm-hmm."

Jing Shao seemed not the least ashamed about getting caught and strolled over to get a good look at the assassin, who was bound head to toe and dressed in the uniform of someone in logistics. He took the dagger handed to him by a guard and examined it carefully, finding it to be exactly the same as the boot knives of the mounted archers that had attacked earlier.

He gave a disdainful scoff. "Is King Dongnan acting like this because he can't wait for us to abolish his fiefdom?"

The man snapped his head up at Jing Shao's words, stunned that Jing Shao had figured out his master's identity. The imperial court shouldn't have known that the mounted archers were subordinate to King Dongnan, which

was why they had dared to launch an open attack on Jing Shao's camp in the first place.

"This Prince wishes to find out everything before dawn. I leave it in your hands." Tossing the dagger to the Left Guardian, Jing Shao snatched the squirming tiger cub out of the Right Guardian's arms and went back to the royal tent to get some sleep as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Listen, Leftie, do you know why His Highness was sleeping in Master Jun's tent?"

The Right Guardian just couldn't figure it out. They'd only seemed a bit intimate during the day, but by nighttime they were already… He tried to shake the thought out of his head. His Highness must have been discussing military intelligence with the strategist. Sometimes, when he got distracted talking to Leftie into the night, they'd also sleep together…but still, it felt so strange… No, since His Highness was so flagrant about it, there must be nothing between them.

The Left Guardian shot a look at him. "Bring the assassin. We're going to the stockade."

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EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Jing Shao got up and headed to the command pavilion to hear the result of the overnight interrogation.

Unsurprisingly, this assassin hadn't been sent in to perform this specific underhanded task but was merely one of the surviving mounted archers. Since he'd fallen off of his horse, he'd used the opportunity to blend

into the logistics camp amid the chaos. King Dongnan had given them a no-return order: If they couldn't kill Prince Cheng, none of them could return.

Jing Shao frowned, looking down at the man sprawled on the floor, beaten to the brink of death. "Then why did you and your men try to kill This Prince's strategist?"

"We weren't…sure which one of you was…Prince Cheng. Just saw he was…dressed…differently and standing in…in front of the…command pavilion, so we thought he was…"

That strategist had stood before the command pavilion and faced down a surprise attack of cavalry without flinching, clad in an aura of refined nobility. If they hadn't discovered that he couldn't fight properly, who would have ever thought that he wasn't Prince Cheng?

As far as things had progressed, their attackers' failure was largely due to their terrible luck. If they'd arrived only one hour earlier, they could have prevented him from leaving. Unfortunately for them, however, they'd gotten the wrong man, and when their captain had realized that he wasn't Prince Cheng, he'd ordered everyone to spread out and search for him. Once separated, they had been eliminated one by one.

As Jing Shao listened to this, the furrow between his brows only grew deeper. If he'd still been at the camp, with the way these people had fought with no regard at all for their own lives, swarming the camp like wasps, then he would have been unlikely to survive the attack, even if he were a peerless fighter. He broke into a cold sweat at the thought—if that captain hadn't realized that Junqing wasn't Prince Cheng, he would have been as good as dead.

“Such insolence!” Jing Shao smashed his fist against the table, seething with anger. In his past life, King Dongnan had only helped King Xinan with secret reinforcements. But now, he was openly attempting assassination—truly detestable!

“Is King Dongnan acting like this ’cause he’s tired of living?” The Right Guardian couldn’t fathom his motivations. The army was already in Xinan, so by provoking them at a time like this, wasn’t he just drawing fire onto himself?

“Were it not for His Highness’s extensive knowledge, we might not have known that these people were subordinate to King Dongnan,” the Left Guardian reminded him.

“Your Highness, the way I see it, we should send him right back to King Dongnan. Maybe it’d scare that old fool into behaving for a bit,” the Right Guardian said, shaking his fist.

“We can’t let him live,” said a mellow, pleasant voice, and everyone turned to the tent’s entrance. Mu Hanzhang, now dressed in light blue, lifted the flap and ducked inside.

“Junqing, why are you up?” Jing Shao frowned. They had been awake so late last night that he’d assumed Mu Hanzhang would sleep until High Noon. He hurriedly beckoned him over to sit down.

Mu Hanzhang didn’t decline his kind offer and took a seat. But as he settled into the chair, he winced slightly.

Staring at Mu Hanzhang, the Right Guardian asked curiously, “Why can’t we let him”—he paused, catching sight of a smidge of red on the strategist’s fair neck—“live?”

“If you drive a dog into a corner, it’ll figure out some way to jump a ten-foot wall. It’s not worth it.” Mu Hanzhang slowly rubbed the jade pendant hanging from his belt and began listing the advantages and disadvantages of such an action.

The reason King Dongnan had done this was most likely because he’d seen the crisis unfolding in Xinan. Knowing that his shield would be gone, he was worried that his fiefdom would be next on the chopping block, so he tried to assist King Xinan in secret. If they were to send this man back to him, that would be akin to telling King Dongnan to his face that the imperial court was already on to him, and it would push him over the edge, leaving him no choice but to openly join in the rebellion with King Xinan.

“Our army is only one hundred thousand strong. The Dongnan forces are well-equipped and powerful, and if they were to join forces with Xinan, we’d have no chance of success.”

Jing Shao listened to all of this in silence and slowly said, “Then why don’t we send him back to the capital?”

“We can’t do that.” Mu Hanzhang immediately vetoed this proposal. “Abolishing Dongnan is just a matter of finding an excuse. And if we need proof, having him will not help us prove anything—King Dongnan would simply deny it. All you need to do is submit a memorial to inform His Majesty of this matter in detail. When the day comes that he wishes to abolish Dongnan, this will be listed as one of the charges against him.”

The journey from Xinan to the capital was a thousand miles, some of which was through treacherous terrain. No one could predict what might happen along the way, and if the news ever got out, King Dongnan could rise

in rebellion whenever he wanted, catching them off guard and leaving them at a great disadvantage.

It tore at Jing Shao's heart to see his consort's face turn paler by the moment; he waved a hand, signaling the guardians to take the captured man to be dealt with, while he got up and embraced the man who was forcing himself to remain sitting upright. He reached down and gently brushed a hand over his consort's butt. "Does it still hurt?"

Mu Hanzhang turned red instantly, swatting away that roaming paw. "It's not bothering me."

"Next time, don't push yourself. Just come right over and sit on your husband's lap," said Jing Shao with a perfectly serious look on his face.

Mu Hanzhang glared at him. "Do try to restrain yourself a little while we're in public. You came out of the strategist's tent last night—surely they're already suspicious."

"My guess is they already know," Jing Shao said, leaning in and licking a spot on Mu Hanzhang's neck. "You didn't cover up this mark right here."

"Huh?" Mu Hanzhang reached up to touch it, and when he felt carefully around that area, it was quite tender to the touch.

Suddenly, he was reminded of the look on the Right Guardian's face, and he blushed at the very thought, getting up to make his leave. This mark had to be intentional—who would accidentally leave one in such a conspicuous spot? It was unbearably embarrassing. How was he supposed to maintain his dignity at base camp from now on?

As his consort left in a huff, Jing Shao immediately chased after him. “Hey, Junqing…”

“Report!”

Mu Hanzhang had walked out of the tent into the path of a young officer coming to deliver a message, riding in on a horse like all military couriers did.

Mu Hanzhang tried to dodge out of the way, but the ache in his lower body slowed him down just enough that a collision seemed inevitable. Immediately, Jing Shao kicked at the galloping horse, grabbed the frightened young messenger by the lapel, and yanked him off his mount.

As Wang Er—who was the type of person eager to please above all else—arrived to deliver a ledger, he saw that their delicate and handsome strategist was about to be trampled under a horse. And so, he reached out to grab Mu Hanzhang and throw him out of the way.

Grabbed from behind and pushed to the ground, Mu Hanzhang let out a loud grunt of pain, the tackle having disturbed the wound on his shoulder.

“Junqing!” When Jing Shao heard Mu Hanzhang’s voice, he dropped the messenger and immediately turned to him to check. The sight instantly sent him into an explosive fury. He threw a punch at the man still on top of Mu Hanzhang who had tossed him to the ground and added a single vicious kick for good measure. “You bastard!”

As he bit his lip against the pain, Mu Hanzhang slowly sat up, reaching a hand to his shoulder to apply pressure over the wound. Bright red blood seeped through the bandages onto his robes, visible through the gaps of his fair fingers, the contrast so stark that it made one’s eyes sting.

“Junqing!” Jing Shao finally came back to his senses, and he rushed over to Mu Hanzhang to wrap him into his arms. When he saw the pallor that came over Mu Hanzhang’s face and the way that sweat beaded and rolled off his forehead, he knew that his wound must have opened up again, and his heart ached terribly. Jing Shao picked him up and ran toward the royal tent.

The guardians that had hurried over to get the news from the messenger were met with this scene.

The Right Guardian walked over to Wang Er, who hadn’t been able to get up yet, and gave him another kick. “Why’d you have to stick your head into other people’s business?!”

Couldn’t he see that everything had already been taken care of? The reason His Highness had kicked the horse instead of grabbing Master Jun was because he’d been worried about disturbing Master Jun’s wound. But this rascal had actually tried to show off, even though he wasn’t even that agile!

The Right Guardian knew who Wang Er was; he used to be one of the guards under his command, but he’d spent too much time shortsightedly trying to curry favor, driven by short-term gains, which was why he had demoted him to logistics. Now that he’d been recruited by the strategist to do bookkeeping, he must have been trying to move beyond his station again.

The Left Guardian shook his head and asked the messenger, “What’s the news?”

“Our forces have already breached the second checkpoint!” he reported.

“So fast?!” the Left Guardian exclaimed in surprise.

“General Hao breached the tiger and crane pass, then led the Shu troops all the way through the path until they broke through the gate at the second checkpoint. Once he was there, he simply brought General Zhao through the pass!” As the messenger relayed this news, he grew markedly more and more excited.

The Left Guardian headed toward the royal tent. His Highness needed to hear this news as soon as possible.

At this moment, however, Jing Shao couldn’t have cared less. The pain that came from a wound reopening was even worse than getting injured in the first place, and when he saw that already scabbed-over cut ripped open and looking gruesome again, Jing Shao got so angry that he picked up a stool and threw it, telling his guards that they needed to kill Wang Er immediately.

“You mustn’t…” Mu Hanzhang reached out to tug at his sleeve.

Of course, it was the prince’s orders that the guards obeyed, and they immediately left to follow through on them.

“He’s lucky I didn’t have him drawn and quartered!” Jing Shao shouted, but his hands couldn’t have been gentler as he dabbed Mu Hanzhang’s forehead with a towel.

“Your Highness, our main force has already breached the second checkpoint,” said the Left Guardian, eyes locked straight ahead the moment he stepped into the tent.

“Understood. Tell the messenger to inform Zhao Meng and Hao Dadao to merge their forces and continue advancing toward the city of Yun!” As Jing Shao said this, he didn’t even look up.

“Certainly!” The Left Guardian accepted the order and said, “Your Highness, when should we break camp?”

Jing Shao’s brows immediately drew together. As he stared down at the pale-faced man on the bed, he hesitated. If they were to break camp now, Mu Hanzhang’s wound would take even longer to heal. Just as he was about to suggest they rest here for a few more days, his consort suddenly grabbed his hand that still held the towel and jostled it, stopping him from speaking.

“First deliver the order to the messenger. Come back later,” Mu Hanzhang said. He knew what Jing Shao was thinking, but he was still in a rage, and it wasn’t the right time to challenge him. All he could do was to ask the Left Guardian to leave momentarily.

“All of the army’s provisions are here. How do you expect the army to lay siege to Yun?” Mu Hanzhang asked, his voice sounding frail.

“The supplies they brought with them will last three more days at least. Your injury is severe. Let’s rest for a couple more days before we start moving again.” Jing Shao produced the small green-jade bottle from his pocket once more.

“How could you abandon our forces for your own selfish reasons? You —” Mu Hanzhang leaned toward him to scold him, but in doing so, he aggravated his wound, making him yelp and fall back.

Chapter 57:
Salve Application

"JUNQING!" JING SHAO swiftly cushioned his fall, and when he saw that his wound was starting to bleed again, he tried to calm him, gently saying, "Take it easy. I haven't decided on anything yet. Let's just dress your wound first before we do anything else."

"I want to use the other salve," Mu Hanzhang said, gasping, and looked up at Jing Shao. They had to march soon, and there was no way he could follow the army with a wound that opened up every time he moved even a bit. He had to make it heal faster.

"Absolutely not!" Jing Shao took a handkerchief and carefully wiped away the blood, then applied the ointment to stop the bleeding. "All we need is just one more day, and we'll make it for sure! If worse comes to worst, we'll just send the provisions ahead."

Mu Hanzhang closed his eyes. "The troops cannot wait. If you insist on doing this when His Majesty holds you accountable, I will go to him and take responsibility myself."

"Junqing." A wave of sadness washed over Jing Shao at his words. If it really came to that, how could he possibly let him take the blame? He said stiffly, "When it comes to the army, I know what I'm doing…"

"You know what you're doing?!" Mu Hanzhang's eyes snapped open, and he glared at him. "Things on the battlefield can change rapidly. Even if you're blessed with divine foresight, you still can't know what could go wrong. Since you're the commander, you are responsible for each of these

hundred thousand lives. How can you disregard their trust for your own selfish interests?!”

Those beautiful eyes were full of pride and determination. Jing Shao locked gazes with him for what felt like ages, and gradually, he began to smile.

He finally understood why Junqing made him feel safe. Apart from what he had experienced in his past life, it was clear that this man had his own thoughts and convictions; he would not waver from his principles just because he was partial to Jing Shao, nor would he act with impunity because he knew he had Jing Shao’s favor. Therefore, Jing Shao could shower him with love without ever having to worry about spoiling him, and he didn’t have to worry he might lose his own way.

“My sagacious wife has a point. Your husband can only comply,” said Jing Shao, leaning in to press a kiss against that fuming, flushed cheek.

Interrupted in such a way, all of Mu Hanzhang’s prepared arguments caught like a fish bone in his throat, and it took him a long time to remember what they’d even been doing. He glared at Jing Shao, but he just couldn’t work up any proper anger looking at this man whose skin was growing thicker by the day.

He breathed out a sigh and said, “I’m a man. Stop treating me like a delicate flower.”

Jing Shao smiled but did not respond. Even if Junqing was hale and hearty and possessed unparalleled martial arts skills, it would still distress him to see him hurt. He rose and fetched another bottle, this one small and dark. He held it in his palm, still hesitating.

“And Wang Er meant well. He may be a little shortsighted and driven by self-interest, but you can’t just kill him!” Mu Hanzhang advised, only just now remembering that Jing Shao had told the guards to kill him.

Jing Shao uncorked the bottle. *My guards have always been quick to follow orders, so Wang Er’s likely lost his head by now,* he thought, but he didn’t dare say that out loud, so all he could do was hum noncommittally while carefully examining Mu Hanzhang’s wound. The ointment from the jade-green bottle had already been absorbed, and the bleeding had just barely been stopped. He’d tested both of these healing balms together before, and they weren’t incompatible, so he could simply apply this one on top.

“If it hurts, just let it out. Don’t bite yourself.” Jing Shao patted the top of his head, still a little reluctant to use it.

Mu Hanzhang nodded at him, but when he saw how unwilling Jing Shao was, he chuckled. He gently said, “If you’re still worried, just hold on to me.”

To Jing Shao this made sense—if it hurt too much and Junqing ended up biting his tongue, he could offer up his own shoulder instead. And so, he sat down at the head of the bed and carefully pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms as he poured a little bit of the translucent salve onto his hand. Quickly, he wiped it over the wound with trembling fingers.

The instant that salve hit Mu Hanzhang’s skin, Jing Shao felt the body in his arms noticeably stiffen. “Ah—!” After that short, pained cry emanated from his barely parted lips, the rest of the complaint was caught in his throat. Beads of sweat rolled off his temples, dampening his hair.

“It’ll stop hurting in a bit, Junqing. It won’t hurt anymore…” Jing Shao stroked his cheek softly, wishing he could take his place.

Mu Hanzhang had never expected it to be this painful! When the salve touched his skin, it felt as if, all at once, a mass of fine needles had stabbed into his body, so intense that his vision went black.

As a gentle voice whispered reassurances by his ear, the pain did start to gradually decrease. Globes of white light floated in front of his eyes until they pieced together into the full image of Jing Shao's face, his beautiful eyes brimming over with concern for him. Mu Hanzhang wanted to give him a reassuring smile, and he managed to force the corner of his mouth to turn up just a little, right before everything suddenly went dark.

Jing Shao stared at Junqing, who had fainted dead away from pain, and his heart hurt so much that he could barely breathe. He carefully uncurled Mu Hanzhang's tightly clenched hands and sprinkled a dozen light kisses over that pale face. Slowly, he settled Mu Hanzhang back onto the bed and wiped away the beads of sweat on his forehead and neck.

Only once he'd finished this did he realize that he, too, was drenched in sweat. Jing Shao wiped his face with the towel and tucked Mu Hanzhang under the covers.

"Your Highness, the Right Guardian wouldn't let me kill Wang Er, so I locked him away in the stockade for now," said a guard who'd just entered the tent. "I did find this on Wang Er, however." He handed a sheet of paper to Jing Shao.

Although Jing Shao was not entirely satisfied with the guard failing to fulfill his order, he could at least give his consort what he wanted now, so he remained silent and said nothing about it. He looked down at the sheet the guard had handed him, but it would have been better if he hadn't seen it,

because one look sent him into such a rage that he felt he had to kill Wang Er after all.

Nothing was written on the sheet of paper; there was only a portrait drawn with a fine brush. Even though the person who drew it wasn't very talented, it was still possible to discern that the man depicted in the portrait was handsome beyond compare, dressed in a robe with wide sleeves and a jade headpiece tied over his long black hair—who else could this be but Mu Hanzhang?

He crushed the portrait in his fist so hard that his knuckles cracked. So, what happened today had been no accident. Wang Er had totally tried to cop a feel on purpose! He glanced at the man on the bed with his ashen, bloodless face—his Junqing was enduring such pain because of a moment of lust from a lecher! He was suddenly glad he hadn't simply killed off Wang Er.

A swift end would have been too good for him!

With a dark gaze, Jing Shao looked up and said, "Investigate him. No matter the means, you must find a charge that would make it necessary to kill him."

"Understood." The guard took this order and quickly turned to leave.

"Wait," Jing Shao called out to the remarkably perceptive young guard who had been recently transferred to his side. "What's your name?"

"My name is Jiang Lang."

Surprised, Jing Shao replied, "You're Doctor Jiang's son?"

"I am," said Jiang Lang, who had a guileless face but was actually quite quick on the uptake. "I passed the Provincial Military Exam in the Third

Month, and thanks to Your Highness's favor, I was transferred to be a part of your elite vanguard."

Before, when Jing Shao had done as his consort had advised and transferred Jiang Lang into his troops, it was because he'd wanted to find some way to bring Imperial Physician Jiang into his faction. But at the time, his household had been in such a state of chaos that he'd forgotten all about it as soon as he turned around.

Jing Shao nodded. "Off you go. And while you're at it, tell the Left Guardian to come in as well."

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THE LEFT GUARDIAN ARRIVED with the Right Guardian in tow.

Though Wang Er was shortsighted, he was shrewd when it came to dealing with people, so whether as a part of the guard or in logistics, he was quite well-liked. The Right Guardian felt that killing him so rashly would demoralize the other soldiers, and that was why he had intervened. When he heard from the guards that His Highness seemed rather angry, he'd come along with the Left Guardian to apologize and to perhaps take this opportunity to talk him out of it.

Jing Shao ignored the self-righteous Right Guardian and said to the Left Guardian, "We break camp early tomorrow morning. Go prepare."

"Certainly," replied the Left Guardian.

“Your Highness, about Wang Er…” The Right Guardian wanted to continue, but he’d barely started to talk when he saw the prince wiping the brow of the man on the bed, attentively tucking his arm under the blanket. This gentle, careful behavior he currently displayed was entirely unlike the regular Prince Cheng—known for “showing concern” for his subordinates with his fists.

Jing Shao only turned to the Right Guardian once he was done taking care of Mu Hanzhang. “What were you going to say?”

“U-um…” the Right Guardian stammered, forgetting all his words. The sight of the red mark on Master Jun’s neck he’d previously spotted had left his brain scrambled all morning, and now His Highness’s blatant actions, making no secret of the pair’s relationship, made it impossible for him to pretend he had no idea what was going on.

“Your Highness, a letter has just arrived from the capital,” the Left Guardian interrupted, taking the letter out of his pocket and handing it over.

Jing Shao glanced at it. The envelope said *From Prince Rui’s Estate*—a message from his older brother. He’d rarely received news since he left the capital, and he wasn’t acting like the first prince either, who wrote a letter of well-being to Father daily, sending dispatches of the battle situation every few days. Emperor Hongzheng did reply to each of his letters, but they were all formal and spoke only of official business. Jing Chen seemed quite busy, and with Jing Shao now away from home, he couldn’t afford to appear too close to his brother, so they couldn’t correspond too frequently.

Eager to know what his brother had written, Jing Shao decided to let the Right Guardian off for now and dismissed both of them.

To my third imperial brother: Father is well, as is the rest of the family… The first part of the letter was full of polite trivialities, which Jing Shao quickly skimmed through so he could get to the important parts.

He ended up reading the letter three times from top to bottom. There was both good and bad news.

Jing Chen revealed in his letter that after Jing Shao's army had left, the military pay embezzlement case against the Ministry of Revenue had snowballed, with more and more people found to be involved. As many as seven officials of third rank and above had already been dismissed, not counting all the officials below third rank. Emperor Hongzheng had ordered a thorough investigation, but when the net was cast so wide that it would soon involve the fourth prince, Duke Mao had suggested that with the war still ongoing, it wasn't the right time to turn the imperial court upside down. Thus, while this case began with a bang, it ended with a whimper.

However, Jing Chen had still managed to achieve most of his goals. For instance, the minister of revenue, who didn't favor Jing Shao, had now been unseated, and Xiao Yuan had been successfully promoted to vice minister of personnel. Not to mention, the emperor was now further dissatisfied with the fourth prince.

The truth was, since the case's inception, Jing Chen had directed the investigation toward the fourth prince's faction, but they seemed to have been well prepared in advance, and he'd had to jump through quite a few hoops.

Additionally, there was one more piece of news that was pertinent to Jing Shao right now, which was that some members of the imperial court had been in contact with King Dongnan. So, it was possible that King Dongnan might be abreast of the current financial status of the imperial government.

Jing Shao slowly folded the letter closed. He now knew the real reason King Dongnan had sent someone to kill him. With the national treasury at a deficit, if they kept fighting like this, as long as King Xinan could drag it on for a few more years, the imperial government would no longer have the ability to sustain this war of attrition. At the end of that, he might even be offered a chance to start peace negotiations with the court.

And to achieve that, all they'd had to do was to kill Jing Shao, the army's grand marshal. Dealing with the death of a prince on the battlefield and finding a replacement right in the middle of a war would delay things for a year or two.

The man on the bed groaned softly as his eyes fluttered open.

Jing Shao set down the letter right away to check on him. "Junqing, does it still hurt?"

For a moment, Mu Hanzhang stared at him before he realized that he'd fainted. The wound on his shoulder didn't really hurt anymore. It was even feeling better than before Jing Shao had applied the salve. His brows drew together. "How long was I asleep?"

"You were only out for an hour." Jing Shao rested his hand atop Mu Hanzhang's head. "It's already past High Noon. If we break camp today, we'll have to travel by night. Let's set off in the morning."

Mu Hanzhang gave a slight nod at this. Thankfully they weren't going to be delayed because of him. When he turned his head, he spotted the letter on the desk. "Is that from your brother?"

"How did you manage to guess that?" Smiling, Jing Shao gently pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms and handed it to him. "Even I'm starting to

wonder if you can actually read the stars.”

Chapter 58:
Traitor

SMILING WORDLESSLY, Mu Hanzhang took the letter in one hand and began to read it. He got two lines in before he remembered that this was a private message between the two brothers and turned to look at Jing Shao, only to find him happily playing with Mu Hanzhang's unoccupied hand. He shook his head in exasperation.

"By the way, you still haven't told me what was with that second silken pouch." Holding that delicate hand in his and running his fingers over skin smooth as jade, Jing Shao toyed with it for a bit before the thought that it looked delicious struck him. He couldn't resist putting it next to his lips for a nibble. When his consort turned to look at him, he let go sheepishly and tried to find something to say.

"Rrrah?" Just now waking up on the bed's footrest, the tiger cub grabbed the bedsheets with his claws and tried his best to climb up. As Jing Shao let go of Mu Hanzhang's hand, it was captured by a furball.

Mu Hanzhang flicked the little cub on the head and pulled his hand back under the covers. He chuckled. "I only gave him that as a contingency plan. If Zhao Meng never fell for the trap and broke the gate as he was meant to, he would have continued to advance. Where would he find the time to look at the silken pouch then?"

And that was why he'd repeatedly instructed Zhao Meng not to open it in advance—because the two stratagems inside that came in sequential order fundamentally contradicted each other!

Unable to find his master's hand, the tiger cub pounced on Jing Shao's to gnaw on instead. He let out a pained hiss and pinched the tiger's mouth to extract his hand, finding a new bruising dent on his thumb.

"Eh? Did you get new teeth?" He tried to pry that furry mouth open to see if it had an extra tooth.

Mu Hanzhang took his hand and rubbed the spot where he was bitten. "Don't let him bite you. If the bite breaks your skin, you could come down with an illness." The elders often said that being bitten by a beast was inauspicious, and one might contract some difficult-to-treat plague.

Jing Shao flipped the tiger cub over, laying him belly up with his four legs in the air. Then he gathered all four of the cub's paws together and refused to let go no matter how hard the cub struggled.

"Raaaaaarh!" The tiger cub unhappily craned his neck to bite him, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn't reach Jing Shao, left to lash at the bedspread with his tail in agitation.

Now that he'd dealt with the little tiger, Jing Shao continued their earlier conversation. "So, what would have happened if Zhao Meng breached the pass and then *also* read the contents of the silken pouch?"

Mu Hanzhang picked up the tiger cub, who was about to throw a tantrum from getting so bullied, and gave him a gentle, soothing stroke on the head before laying the little guy on his back between his legs to scratch his belly. "Do you think Zhao Meng could understand what I wrote in that situation? Once he got back, I would have come up with something to explain it."

The sea of suffering is boundless; turn back and you will find the shore. One had to be in the midst of suffering to comprehend its meaning—if

everything had been smooth sailing, knowing how single-minded Zhao Meng was, he never would have tried to figure out what it meant.

"Junqing, you…" Jing Shao suddenly couldn't think of anything to say —this was such a dirty trick, especially considering the way Zhao Meng practically worshipped Master Jun.

The cub had enjoyed the petting so much that he rubbed his head against the blanket and fell asleep, still belly-up. Laughing, Mu Hanzhang tucked his head into the crook of Jing Shao's neck.

"And that's why strategists have never spoken in absolute terms, from time immemorial. When they say 'heaven's will must not be divulged,' it's actually because they're not sure either." In some respects, strategists weren't much different from fortune tellers.

With a sigh, Jing Shao pulled Mu Hanzhang a little closer and took the letter so they could discuss what was happening in the imperial court further. At its root, this incident had been caused by the audit conducted before they left the capital, and any minuscule change could cause subsequent events to move in a completely different direction, so it was best to be more cautious from now on. His experiences in the past life might not always be applicable to this one.

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AFTER LUNCH, Mu Hanzhang had originally planned to take a walk but was forcibly held down on the bed and told to rest more. He couldn't convince Jing Shao otherwise, so he was forced to take an afternoon nap,

holding on to the little tiger. The tiger cub found it too hot under the covers and eventually climbed onto the pillow, wrapped himself around his master's head, and went back to sleep.

When the Right Guardian came in to see Mu Hanzhang, he was met by their peacefully sleeping strategist wearing a tiger-skin hat that was completely at odds with his temperament. As the Right Guardian tried to stifle a laugh, he instantly woke Mu Hanzhang, who was only in a light doze.

Seeing the Right Guardian, Mu Hanzhang repositioned the tiger away from the top of his head and slowly sat up. "Do you need something, Right Guardian?"

"It's like this—His Highness's put Wang Er, who's in charge of the provisions tent, in the stockade. When the cook went to collect ingredients for the evening, no one was there to register it. So, I came here to see if you have anyone to replace him with."

Since they'd had an assassin impersonating a member of logistics, the Right Guardian had spent all day reassigning duties and double-checking anyone who might be deemed suspicious. By the end of the day, he'd been famished, and he had asked the cook to prepare a special meal for him, only to be told that since no rice or flour had been available to collect, the cook hadn't been able to make anything.

Wang Er had been locked away? Mu Hanzhang frowned. "For now, transfer over the clerk who handles letters in logistics."

"Certainly," replied the Right Guardian. He was already starting to walk away, but after a few steps, he turned back, staring at Mu Hanzhang who was slowly putting on his outer robe, like he wanted to say something.

“Is there anything else?” Mu Hanzhang looked up at him. When that rascal Jing Shao had removed his outer robe for him earlier, he’d taken off his underpants too. If the Right Guardian kept standing around like this, he couldn’t get out of bed to put his pants on.

The Right Guardian scratched his head. He had a feeling that this question was overstepping, but his curiosity got the better of him. He pulled up a stool and sat by the bed. “Master Jun, um, what’s going on between you and His Highness?”

Mu Hanzhang froze for a moment, then slowly lowered his gaze. “If you don’t have business to discuss, please leave, Right Guardian.”

This reaction only confirmed the Right Guardian’s suspicions—His Highness must have been forcing Master Jun to submit to him.

He sighed and said, “Master Jun, you’re a man with genuine talent and knowledge. If His Highness really is taking advantage of you, there’s nothing you need to worry about. I’ve worked for His Highness for many years, and even though his words can be harsh, he really does have a good heart…”

“I believe you must have misunderstood something.” Mu Hanzhang looked up at him with a teasing, inscrutable smile. “The relationship between myself and His Highness is much like the one between you and the Left Guardian.”

“Huh?” The Right Guardian practically leaped into the air—how could they possibly be the same? The bond he shared with Leftie had been forged over years of fighting together on the battlefield, and it clearly wasn’t the same as that nebulous behavior between the strategist and the prince! The thought of Leftie wiping his sweat and covering him with a quilt like the prince had… He couldn’t help but shiver; how terrifying.

Frightened by the images he'd conjured up in his own mind and by the seemingly knowing smile on Master Jun's face that felt like it saw right through him, he found himself unable to sit here any longer, and with a quick goodbye, he left as if trying to flee.

Once the Right Guardian was gone, a furrow slowly deepened between Mu Hanzhang's brows. Now that even the Right Guardian had noticed that there was something not so platonic between Jing Shao and himself, who knew what sort of rumors about them were already flying around the camp? Also, why had Wang Er been put in the stockade?

He rose and dressed, then went off to track down that reckless guy to settle the score. But as soon as he stepped into the command pavilion, he saw Jiang Lang handing a small booklet to Jing Shao.

"Junqing, you came at just the right time. Take a look at this." Jing Shao waved around the booklet in his hand. The cover was yellowed, and the corners were curled; it had clearly been in use for many years.

Mu Hanzhang took the booklet and opened it. Its pages were densely filled with numbers and phrases. He wasn't quite sure what to make of the first few pages, but when he got further in, his eyes slowly widened. "Where did you get this?"

"We found it in Wang Er's personal belongings," Jing Shao admitted.

Mu Hanzhang had no time to argue about his petty behavior. He said gravely, "I don't know what the line items in the beginning are, but these pages at the back are the camp's total provisions and the amount consumed daily. I have explicitly forbidden them from copying these things down in private, and the last page is probably an excerpt of his correspondence with

someone.” Saying this, he turned the booklet upside down and opened the last page for Jing Shao to see.

Jing Shao examined it carefully. Each of these excerpts seemed to be what was promised to Wang Er by the one he was corresponding with. Jiang Lang had said he’d already searched through Wang Er’s living quarters and hadn’t found any written communication like a letter.

Quantity of provisions… Jing Shao silently pondered the contents of this booklet. He had suspected Wang Er might be sending information to the fourth prince at first, but with the army already on the march, it would be futile to keep the fourth prince abreast of how well stocked they were. The only ones who could need this ledger were King Dongnan and King Xinan!

“Get the Left Guardian to interrogate Wang Er immediately, and make sure to find out who he’s been in contact with, and how,” Jing Shao told Jiang Lang.

Chapter 59:
City of Yun

ONCE JIANG LANG WAS GONE, Mu Hanzhang walked over to Jing Shao and asked, “How did you figure out that something about Wang Er was off?” Why did he think of investigating a bookkeeping clerk out of the blue?

Jing Shao reached out and pulled him tightly into his arms. Then, with one arm around Mu Hanzhang’s waist, he picked up a brush and began to write a memorial to report on his well-being.

“When I saw how dodgy his eyes looked today, I got suspicious—that’s all,” said Jing Shao, making up an excuse on the spot. Truthfully, he’d never even seen Wang Er’s face. He was Prince Cheng! He wasn’t about to admit that he’d had the man investigated in order to put to death the pervert who coveted his consort!

The man he held exuded the mild aroma of herbal medicine. Though Jing Shao hadn’t liked the smell of this salve before, when it clung to his consort and mixed with his scent, he found it unexpectedly pleasant and couldn’t resist burying his nose in the fabric, breathing in deeply.

It tickled, so Mu Hanzhang broke free from his embrace to sit down nearby. “Are you going to report King Dongnan’s tactical maneuvers to Father?”

“Yes.” Jing Shao was clearly irritated that he couldn’t continue fondling Mu Hanzhang. Unfortunately, even though his consort was sitting right there, he wouldn’t be able to keep writing while holding on to him, so

he had to abandon that line of thinking to hurry up and finish writing his memorial.

"You should mention Hao Dadao's contributions and the valor of the Shu forces," Mu Hanzhang suggested, looking over what Jing Shao had written so far.

"The Shu forces?" Jing Shao turned to him, puzzled. He'd naturally intended on bringing up Hao Dadao's contributions and his family background, as he was hoping Father would make him a general as soon as possible, but why would he mention the Shu troops? All they'd done was fight alongside Hao Dadao, no different from the Hunan regiment or the Guizhou regiment, so why would he single them out in particular?

Mu Hanzhang smiled. "Could it be that Your Highness has already forgotten that the Shu troops were just fighting for the first prince against the southern barbarians not too long ago?"

At the time, the Shu forces had been deployed to save the first prince. Then, once Jing Rong had been rescued, he'd launched an assault against the southern territories with those same soldiers but had achieved little success. As soon as the war in Xinan had begun, Emperor Hongzheng had recalled the Shu troops and had them follow Jing Shao to Xinan. The only contingent that remained with Jing Rong were the troops that belonged to the Conquering General of the East.

Jing Shao considered this—if he praised the Shu troops for their valor, Emperor Hongzheng would recall their lack of achievements under the first prince, making the contrast between their abilities blatant.

After a brief silence, Jing Shao slowly admitted, "Junqing…good thing you didn't end up marrying someone else!"

Mu Hanzhang shook his head. He sighed softly. “Even if I had married someone else, there’s no way I’d be helping them with all my heart like this.” *I don’t think anyone could adore and trust me the way you do*… He didn’t say this part out loud, merely locking eyes with Jing Shao. When he saw the way the prince’s lips cracked in a grin, he felt compelled to reach out and pinch his cheek.

“Well, of course. Nobody in the imperial family’s more handsome than I am,” said Jing Shao proudly.

This instantly amused Mu Hanzhang. He pressed his fingers against his lips and chuckled. “That’s true. No one in the imperial family has skin as thick as you do.”

The memorial of well-being was finally completed amid their playful banter, and the Left Guardian returned to report back on the result of his questioning.

Wang Er had broken under interrogation and had quickly confessed to everything. The contact paying him off was a minor official in the capital, and they had only requested reports on the army’s daily food and hay consumption, and nothing else.

“When did this start?” Jing Shao asked.

“Ever since Wang Er was made a clerk and we were still stationed in the countryside near the capital. But he didn’t start passing information along until we crossed the border into Shu.” The Left Guardian answered in great detail. He was responsible for all interrogations that took place in the camp, so he knew best how far to go and what to ask.

By finding out how many provisions were consumed each day, one could determine the number of soldiers that remained at base camp. Jing

Shao frowned. No wonder the mounted soldiers had launched a surprise attack the other day—they knew that their main forces weren't in camp and the chance of successfully killing him was high.

"That minor official must have been a secret agent placed in the capital by King Xinan." Mu Hanzhang idly rubbed the agate paperweight on Jing Shao's desk. It had to have been King Xinan who'd been monitoring the army's movements since before they'd begun marching.

"Wang Er had no idea what that person's name was, and someone else kept in contact with him once we arrived in Xinan." The Left Guardian presented Jing Shao with a letter. "This is the note that Wang Er hadn't yet had the chance to deliver today."

The slip held only a few numbers written in barely legible handwriting and was tightly wrapped in wax paper.

Mu Hanzhang examined the note for a moment, then picked up a piece of paper and wrote down a few numbers himself. His writing looked exactly like Wang Er's, except that the numbers were nearly triple the original amounts. "These counts include the Shu troops."

Jing Shao took the note from him, understanding his consort's intent immediately. If their opponent believed that the Shu troops had returned to camp, the Xinan or Dongnan troops lying in wait nearby wouldn't dare act rashly. When they broke camp tomorrow, the chances of encountering an ambush would be greatly reduced.

The Left Guardian stared at the note in his hand, utterly astonished.

"Your Highness, then what should we do with Wang Er?" He had originally spared Wang Er because he'd thought His Highness might need

him to pass on false information, never imagining that Master Jun was in possession of such extraordinary talent.

Jing Shao's brows knitted. "Kill him, but keep it quiet for now."

Even though he very much wanted to beat him to death in front of the entire army as befitting of one who coveted their strategist—no, as one who colluded with the enemy and committed treason—he couldn't make it public if he wanted to send a message in Wang Er's name.

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BEFORE BREAKING CAMP the next day, Jing Shao asked Jiang Lang to add another quilt to the floor of the carriage, fearing that it might be a bumpy ride.

The journey from Shengjing Pass into the Xinan hinterland was surprisingly smooth and unimpeded, undoubtedly due to the note they'd passed along in Wang Er's name yesterday. Hao Dadao's vanguard had already fought their way to the outskirts of Yun, so presumably the Xinan army didn't have the energy to deal with Jing Shao's main forces—which had suddenly grown in number—and had likely retreated to gather reinforcements.

When he saw how few obstacles there were in their path, Jing Shao slipped inside the strategist's carriage, leaving Shadow to meander idly behind it.

The little tiger was leaning out the window, looking outside, so curious about Shadow that he was staring at him without blinking. When Shadow

ignored him and just kept walking with his head down, Li'l Sunbeam stretched his paw toward him. Shadow shot a glance at the fluffy orange ball by the window and snorted in his general direction.

Startled, the little tiger cub retracted into a ball and rolled off onto the soft quilts, letting out a high-pitched cry. "Rrrow!"

"Aiyoh, you just made yourself sound like a cat," Jing Shao exclaimed and grabbed Li'l Sunbeam, tugging at his ear. "Do it again."

"Raaa!" The very sight of Jing Shao made the tiger cub grumpy, and he shook his head, freeing his ear from the prince's grasp.

Mu Hanzhang smiled and stroked that soft, round ear. "Haven't you been in here too long? How does it look for you to stay in the carriage like this?"

"Master Jun's injuries are not yet healed, and This Prince cherishes talent above all else, so naturally I must stay in the carriage to care for our strategist." Jing Shao rested his head on a big, soft pillow and sidled up shamelessly to his consort.

"What is everyone in the army supposed to think when you act like this?" Mu Hanzhang let out a helpless sigh. The Right Guardian had already asked him outright the other day—Jing Shao must have done something when he was unconscious.

"Let them think whatever they want," Jing Shao said, unconcerned, pondering how best to let everyone know that Master Jun was his princely consort so as to put an end to certain people's fantasies.

Ever since he'd discovered Wang Er secretly keeping a portrait of Junqing, Jing Shao had realized how high-profile his princely consort had

become in the army. If even a spy couldn't help but admire Junqing, didn't that mean there had to be many others? He was suddenly overcome with a sense of impending danger that his treasure might be discovered by others, and what was more, these people didn't yet understand that this treasure belonged to him exclusively.

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glare, and hugging the tiger cub in his arms, he tried to sleep.

The tiger cub twisted around in his master's lap, and with his claws retracted, he pawed softly at Mu Hanzhang's elegantly shaped chin, rubbing the top of his round head against it.

Ticklish, Mu Hanzhang laughed, then looked down at him.

The tiger cub turned over to show him his belly, softly calling out to his master. Because his voice was so squeaky, his *raaahr* turned into *meow!*

Jing Shao couldn't bear to watch any more. He tossed the cub into a corner of the carriage, then scooted over into the space next to Junqing the tiger had just been in.

Seeing this childish behavior, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but chuckle. He reached out to pat the top of his head. "If you don't want to go, then take a nap. Once we reach Yun in the evening, you probably won't be able to get a good night's sleep for a while."

The caress of that warm, slender hand was so relaxing that Jing Shao's eyes slowly closed, and he buried his face in Mu Hanzhang's chest, wrapping one arm around his lithe, narrow waist. "Then stay with me while I sleep."

"I'm right here, aren't I? Where else could I go?" Mu Hanzhang smiled and eased himself down a little as well so they laid their heads on the same

long pillow. That they'd actually managed to catch a peaceful afternoon nap in the middle of a conquest was exactly like the saying: to steal a breath of serenity in a fleeting life.

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THEIR JOURNEY CONTINUED completely unimpeded, with few weapons and dead bodies littered along the way; no doubt this was thanks to Hao Dadao taking the time to clear the battlefield as he advanced. According to messages from the front, once Hao Dadao had made it through the tiger and crane pass, he'd gone around the second checkpoint and breached it in one maneuver, then joined forces with Zhao Meng and continued to advance without pause. The Xinan army had never anticipated Shengjing Pass to fall in the span of days, and the news had left them scrambling, suffering defeat after defeat as Jing Shao's army closed in on Yun.

The Xinan Fiefdom wasn't large to begin with, and their main city, Yun, wasn't far from Shengjing Pass.

By the time they'd begun approaching Yun, Hao Dadao had already begun to lay siege to the city.

The city of clouds, Yun, was named for its unusual terrain—rising abruptly from the ground, it towered high above everything around it, so when one stood on its battlements, it really did feel like it was floating among the clouds.

It was late when they finally arrived, so they were just in time to see the army returning to camp. When they saw Jing Shao's Vanguard Battalion,

Zhao Meng rushed right over while Hao Dadao directed the soldiers to disperse on their own, then dismounted so he could also come greet them.

"Master Jun, Master Jun, those three silken pouches you gave me were incredibly useful! They're absolutely miraculous, that's what they are. I am truly impressed!" Before he'd even seen the prince, Zhao Meng went right for the strategist's carriage, shouting loudly outside.

But when the carriage's curtain was lifted, the first to step out was somehow their marshal!

Jing Shao had snuggled with his soft, sweet-smelling consort in the carriage and had a very gainful rest. He stepped out, stretched his limbs, and turned to help the man in the carriage step down. A slender, smooth hand reached out of the carriage. Jing Shao took it, and their strategist emerged, clad in snow-white robes and a jade headpiece, with the furry tiger in his arms.

Zhao Meng seemed stunned for a moment, then laughed. "I was wondering why I didn't see Your Highness. I see you're slacking off in Master Jun's carriage."

"General Zhao, it has been a while." Mu Hanzhang greeted Zhao Meng.

Worried that he might aggravate his injury by jumping off the carriage, Jing Shao took the tiger cub from him and put it in Jiang Lang's arms, then reached out to carry his consort down.

"Your Highness!" Mu Hanzhang was caught off guard; Jing Shao swept him off his feet before he could protest. His face went red immediately —in front of so many people, it would have been embarrassing even if

everyone knew that they were married, let alone in their current disguise as merely a marshal and his strategist. Such behavior was far too inappropriate!

"You're injured; stop moving!" said Jing Shao without batting an eye, carefully setting him down.

Hearing this, Zhao Meng immediately forgot all about the evocative situation he'd just witnessed and asked urgently, "I heard the base camp was attacked. Are you hurt, Master Jun?"

Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips and glared at the man who'd clearly done this on purpose. Then with a soft laugh, he said, "It's of minor consequence. Just a flesh wound."

"Oh well, as long as you're all right. I got quite a few new scars this time around too. You know how it is—a man's got to have a few scars to be a real man!" Zhao Meng laughed heartily as he went to pat Master Jun on the shoulder, only to have his wrist swiftly seized by Jing Shao's fast reflexes.

Hao Dadao watched the rowdy bunch. While it was true that His Highness's full trust in him and Master Jun's divine foresight had left him impressed when they took the field, there was something in how they hung off of each other that rubbed him the wrong way. But he was not interested in meddling in other people's private affairs, so he held himself back from showing any emotion and stepped forward to salute them.

Watching Hao Dadao act with such measured restraint, Jing Shao nodded in satisfaction. Then, turning to Zhao Meng, whose wrist he was grabbing, he felt a little irritated despite himself. He instructed everyone to get their things squared away, then to assemble at the command pavilion. Rewards and punishments would be meted out depending on everyone's performance in their assault on Shengjing Pass.

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HAO DADAO HAD GREATLY distinguished himself, and none in the army could deny his valor and prowess in battle, so Jing Shao simply made him a general. The marshal had the right to decide the life, death, appointments, and dismissals of his troops while in the field, but Hao Dadao's specific rank would have to wait on His Majesty's decision.

No one had any objections. Hao Dadao knelt and received his general's armor and uniform.

"Hao, my friend, with your exceptional valor and might, you truly deserve to be made general!" Zhao Meng was also beyond impressed with Hao Dadao and happily got up to bump fists with him.

"Don't celebrate just yet." Jing Shao looked coldly toward Zhao Meng, who was grinning like a fool. "Zhao Meng, by acting impulsively and disregarding the broader strategy, you almost caused the total annihilation of our cavalry. You are no longer fit for the role of general and are hereby demoted to senior officer."

At this, Zhao Meng's face fell and he knelt to accept. "I am guilty as charged. I accept this punishment."

Once Jing Shao was done meting out rewards and punishments to the other junior officers, he spread out the map to start formulating a siege plan with everyone.

"The walled city of Yun only has two entrances, the front and the back. I have ordered my men to guard the rear one to prevent King Xinan from

escaping the city," said Hao Dadao, pointing at the map. "But Yun's elevation is too high, and both gates are hard to approach. I have also discovered that the walls of Yun are really sturdy."

This report reminded Mu Hanzhang of some history books he'd once read. He said with a frown, "Yun was constructed during the founding of the nation. To demonstrate his favor, the founding emperor built these high walls with sticky rice mortar, making them impregnable."

"Sticky rice mortar!" Zhao Meng was astonished beyond measure. Rice porridge and mud mixed together made mortar exponentially more viscous, and a wall built out of it was well and truly a bastion of copper and iron—essentially unbreakable.

"Ah, I see." Hao Dadao nodded. "Master Jun is erudite, indeed."

Jing Shao smiled. He pointed at the outline of Yun on the map, one long index finger directed at the west side of the back gate. "The wall ten feet west of the gate is not made of sticky rice mortar."

Everyone in the pavilion turned to him, utterly flabbergasted.

"Your Highness, how do you know this?" Zhao Meng couldn't help but ask.

Jing Shao shot him a glance but did not answer. "Tomorrow, we will divide our forces in half to attack the city. Zhao Meng, as vanguard, will attack the main gate, while Hao Dadao will lead troops to take the rear."

"Understood!" Everyone accepted their assignment and left.

Jing Shao stretched and then followed his consort toward the strategist's tent.

“You’re not returning to the royal tent?” Mu Hanzhang stopped walking to look at him.

“This Prince still has matters to discuss with the strategist,” Jing Shao said unflinchingly.

“And those are?” Mu Hanzhang glared at him. Was this man worried that there might be a single person left who wasn’t aware that he had a less than pure relationship with his strategist?

Smiling, Jing Shao leaned in closer. “Don’t you want to know how I knew about the city wall west of the back gate?”

Mu Hanzhang angled himself away from him. “One raises a tiger at one’s own peril. Someone as wise and valiant as the founding emperor must have left a backup plan for his future descendants. It is no surprise that Your Highness is privy to such imperial family secrets.” This said, he turned and left.

Jing Shao scratched his head. Actually, this wasn’t any kind of family secret—while it was true that the founding emperor had kept a card up his sleeve, he’d likely done it at the inception of the empire because he thought King Xinan might rise in revolt. As King Xinan hadn’t caused trouble for a whole generation, the founding emperor had completely forgotten about telling his descendants. In his past life, Jing Shao had only discovered this because one of the soldiers carrying the battering ram had been shot, and the direction of the ram deviated, smashing through that section of the city wall by pure happenstance.

He looked up at the crescent moon above, fine as a hook. In his past life, it had taken him months just to get through Shengjing Pass, but now that they’d reached Yun before the month was out, he had no one to share this

excitement with. It was an exceptionally lonely feeling. And so, he returned to the royal tent, wrote a letter home to his brother, and only once all the lights inside the tents had been extinguished did he sneak from the royal tent into the strategist's tent.

"Rraaah!" Li'l Sunbeam, sleeping at the side of the bed, had his tail abruptly stepped on by the sudden intruder. He jumped up at once and bared his teeth to roar angrily at Jing Shao, only to get flicked on his head.

Mu Hanzhang breathed out a resigned sigh and shifted further into the bed to make room for Jing Shao. Beaming, he immediately stripped off his outer robes and slipped in beside him.

"Can't you sleep in your own tent for one night?" Mu Hanzhang turned to look at him.

"It's not safe to sleep on my own." Jing Shao snuggled closer to the warm body next to him. "Another assassin might come."

Li'l Sunbeam was quite unhappy to have his spot taken, and he tugged at Jing Shao's collar for ages. But alas, a little tiger could not carry a grown man off the bed in his small jaws, and he ended up getting hoisted onto the footrest by the scruff of his neck instead.

Stubborn, Li'l Sunbeam climbed back onto the bed and curled up on Jing Shao's chest. To Jing Shao, it felt as though a ghost had sat on him, and it woke him up several times throughout the night.

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THE NEXT DAY, Zhao Meng and Hao Dadao led their troops to attack the city while Xinan's forces dispatched troops to answer their challenge. Zhao Meng fought fiercely with their adversary's general, resulting in a stalemate, and soldiers from both sides rushed forward to engage in melee. Xinan's forces primarily focused on defending the city and quickly retreated back inside when the attackers neared the gates. This was followed by a deadly barrage of rolling stones thrown down from above, using Yun's terrain for maximum impact. Zhao Meng had no choice but to fall back with his troops.

On the other side, Hao Dadao was met with similar treatment. Never mind laying siege to the city walls—it was difficult even just to approach them.

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AFTER A FULL DAY OF COMBAT with no breakthrough, the army returned to the camp to fight another day.

"Hey, I heard that His Highness stayed overnight in the strategist's tent again," whispered one patrolling soldier to another.

"Aiyoh, ever since that attempted assassination, I've been keeping an eye on the royal tent. His Highness barely ever sleeps in it," whispered another soldier.

"What are you people talking about?!" The Right Guardian slapped them each on the head from behind.

The soldiers shrank back, not daring to say more, and continued on with their patrol.

Zhao Meng, who'd come to shoot the breeze with the Right Guardian, walked around the corner. Seeing this unfold, he couldn't help but ask, "Hey, what exactly is going on between His Highness and Master Jun anyway?"

"I don't know either." The Right Guardian stared at the ground in frustration, and recalling what Master Jun had said, he couldn't help but shiver.

"Last I heard, His Highness didn't like men, right? When His Majesty made him take a man as a wife, didn't he throw a fit about it?" Zhao Meng was desperate to know.

Hao Dadao, who'd come over to share jerky with them, frowned at this news despite himself. "You mean His Highness already has a wife, and it's a gentleman wife?"

"Yeah, you didn't know?" Zhao Meng chuckled, proud he finally knew something Hao Dadao didn't. "The princely consort is the son of Marquis Beiwei's secondary wife. He came from a noble background and is said to be quite famous among the scholars in the capital too."

His Highness's wife was kept as a hostage in the capital, yet he was out here carrying on this illicit affair. Why, this really was…

Hao Dadao put down the jerky and left at once.

Mu Hanzhang was sitting alone by the river watching the tiger cub play in the bushes, catching bugs. When he heard footsteps, he thought it was Jing Shao, but to his surprise, it was a grim-faced Hao Dadao.

Chapter 60:
Princely Consort

"General Hao." Mu Hanzhang stood up, and noticing the man's stormy expression, he asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"Master Jun, I'm a simple fellow, and I'm not well-read or insightful, but when it comes to certain things, I just feel compelled to intervene." Hao Dadao glared down at him, his towering, robust figure a whole head taller than Mu Hanzhang, exuding a sense of imposing pressure.

Mu Hanzhang paused, then took a half step back to leave the smooth, clean stone for him to sit on. He said warmly, "General Hao, if you have encountered any difficulties, feel free to tell me. I may lack talent, but if there is anything I can help you with, I certainly won't say no."

Facing their gentle and polite strategist, Hao Dadao felt as though his fist had landed in a bag of cotton, and that chest full of rage traveled right back down into his stomach. He immediately felt uncomfortable all over and sat down on the rock with a huff.

"Raaowr!" Li'l Sunbeam jumped onto the rock, curiously clawing at the cloth bag hanging from Hao Dadao's waist.

Mu Hanzhang's lips turned up in a slight smile. "So, what exactly has happened?"

Hao Dadao heaved a sigh. "Master Jun, it's none of my business what's going on between you and His Highness, but I heard that he already has a wife back in the capital, and that wife's a gentleman from a noble background."

Mu Hanzhang frowned. “Why are you telling me this, General?”

“*Laws of the Chen Empire* stipulate that one can take a man as a wife but not as a concubine. Carrying on the way you do with His Highness is really disrespectful to the princely consort.” Hao Dadao got more and more agitated as he spoke; he could never stand those people who messed around after they got married. Finding a wife wasn’t easy and taking care of one’s family was what a real man should do.

“General Hao…” Mu Hanzhang blinked.

“With your talent, Master Jun, you could easily take the Primus Scholar place in the Palace Exams. So why do you have to stay with a man in an illicit relationship like this?”

When he said these words out loud, they sounded hurtful, so much so that Hao Dadao didn’t dare look up to see what expression Mu Hanzhang wore. Their strategist had always treated him well, and Hao Dadao had greatly admired his actions during the time they’d known each other. He truly didn’t wish to see him debase himself so.

Mu Hanzhang struggled not to smile at Hao Dadao’s expression, his lips tightly pursed. When he looked down to find that Li’l Sunbeam had already gnawed a hole in the general’s purse to dig out the jerky, and was now eating with relish, he finally couldn’t suppress his laughter. He quickly restrained the smile as soon as Hao Dadao looked up at him.

“General Hao truly is a man of integrity and honor, and that is something I greatly admire. However, I fear I will never be able to participate in the Civil Service Examination again.”

“Why is that?” Hao Dadao asked, confused.

“Because he is already wedded to Prince Cheng as his wife.” Earlier, Jing Shao had stopped several steps away because his consort had signaled him to do so, but now he couldn’t help but interject himself into the conversation.

“Huh?” Hao Dadao was completely thrown off. He stood up suddenly, causing the jerky in the bag to scatter all over the ground. Li’l Sunbeam let out a *raah* and pounced on them, frantically clutching at this piece, then that one, unsure which to start eating first.

Jing Shao strode forward and pulled his consort into his arms. These guys had nothing better to do, and instead of spending their time mulling over battlefield strategy, they chose to come make things awkward for Junqing instead. How detestable.

Mu Hanzhang freed himself from the arm wrapped around his waist. With a faint blush coloring his handsome face, he cleared his throat and said to Hao Dadao apologetically, “I had no other option but to keep it to myself. Firstly, it is against the rules for the spouse of a general to leave the capital, and secondly, I was hoping that the soldiers in the army would genuinely accept me, rather than treat me with the meaningless respect they would have shown to a princely consort. My apologies for causing this misunderstanding.”

Hao Dadao’s eyes went wide. His steadfast face rapidly shifted from a dark grimness to a flustered crimson flush, tingeing with a hue of ill nausea, before galvanizing into utter shock!

Jing Shao sidled up to his consort and wrapped his arms around his waist again, then rested his chin on Mu Hanzhang’s right shoulder as he watched Hao Dadao’s face color-changing act with much amusement. In his

past life, when he'd visited brothels in Jiangnan, Hao Dadao had given him a good talking-to. Unfortunately, it had gone in one ear and out the other at the time, and he'd even mocked Hao Dadao for being afraid of his wife. When he thought back now, Hao Dadao had always had the right approach—since he had a wife, he should respect and protect him.

Hao Dadao gave a couple of dry chuckles. "Well, if that's the case, it's my mistake for meddling in other people's business." He turned to leave.

"General." Mu Hanzhang quickly called out to him. "It would be best if you keep this to yourself."

Hao Dadao seemed to contemplate this for a moment before he said with a furrowed brow, "You should at least let Zhao Meng and the others know. Otherwise, it would be detrimental to your authority, Master Jun." Thinking back to the way they'd smirked, it was probably a bad thing for them to go on not knowing. Besides, how could he be the only one to make a fool of himself?!

"That makes sense," Jing Shao quickly agreed. "You can go ahead and tell them, but don't tell anyone else."

Only once Hao Dadao had left did Mu Hanzhang put away his smile, and he turned to face Jing Shao, who still looked rather smug. "Your goal has been achieved. Are you satisfied now?"

Jing Shao blinked innocently, trying to pretend he had no idea what Mu Hanzhang was talking about.

"The way you've been acting this whole time—haven't you done that in order for everyone to find out my real identity?" Mu Hanzhang said irritably. "And why did you do that, anyway?"

“Hmph. Every day, whenever I wanted to hold my own wife, I had to sneak around. How does that make any sense?!” Jing Shao had initially felt a bit guilty, so he’d come up with a random excuse. But the longer he went on, the more he thought he was in the right, and gradually raised his head.

Mu Hanzhang sighed and turned around to gather up the scattered jerky to prevent the tiger cub from overeating. He whispered, “Even though Father gave his tacit approval, others in the capital are not aware of this. Now that it’s out in the open, I’m afraid it will come back to bite us later.”

Jing Shao crouched down next to him, wrapped him into his embrace, and kissed his polished brow. “With me here, nothing can happen to you.”

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AFTER HAO DADAO saluted and left, he headed straight for the Right Guardian’s tent. As he’d expected, Zhao Meng was still there, along with the Left Guardian. Hao Dadao removed the ripped purse from his belt, grabbed a new one, then started sweeping the jerky from the table into the bag.

“Hey, that’s my jerky! What happened to yours?” The Right Guardian hurriedly walked over to protect his pile.

“The tiger cub ate it,” said Hao Dadao with a snort.

“You actually went to see Master Jun?” Zhao Meng’s eyes opened wide. The rest of them only gossiped in private, but Hao Dadao actually had the gall to question him to his face. Their wise and brave Master Jun must have had his reasons for submitting to His Highness, and when he thought of that, Zhao Meng jumped to his feet. “How could you be such a fool? Asking

him directly like that, how do you expect Master Jun to face the rest of us in the army from now on?"

"Exactly! You're being far too reckless!" The Right Guardian packed up his jerky as he reprimanded Hao Dadao.

The Left Guardian silently sipped a cup of hot tea. When he saw that the Right Guardian didn't have room for all his jerky, he handed over his own pouch.

"What do you people know?" Hao Dadao waved a hand and said angrily, "He's the lawfully wedded Princely Consort Cheng!"

The once boisterous army tent fell completely silent. Zhao Meng, who was just about to rush out to console their strategist, stumbled over his feet, while the Right Guardian dropped his jerky all over the floor. That left only the Left Guardian, who just kept silently drinking his tea.

"Ah!" A patrolling guard heard a scream from the Right Guardian's tent and hurried over to check what was wrong, only to be driven out again to continue his patrol, still puzzled over the source of the scream.

"I'm dead, I'm dead…" Zhao Meng squatted on the floor, rubbing intensely at his bristly beard, recalling every single thing he'd done ever since Mu Hanzhang entered their camp. It was enough for His Highness to turn him into mincemeat.

"It's all right; it's fine. All you did was throw your arm around the princely consort and have a drink with him, right? His Highness is magnanimous enough to not hold it against you," said the Right Guardian as he patted Zhao Meng's shoulder with a complete lack of sympathy.

As a result of receiving such a shocking piece of news, the generals didn't dare to speak to their strategist for days.

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SETTING ASIDE whatever bedlam took place among those in camp during the day, the siege never ceased for a single moment.

Yun's terrain made a siege against the city difficult. Each day, they challenged those inside to duels, and some did come out to meet the challenge at first. But after Hao Dadao, in a fit of rage, beheaded a general who accepted his duel, no one dared come out through the gates anymore. After that, they'd relied on arrows and stones to keep Jing Shao's men from approaching.

This stalemate lasted for a fortnight, until Yun exhausted its store of arrows. Since the people of Xinan were accustomed to building with bamboo, any houses made of stone had already been dismantled, and there were few stones left for them to throw.

Jing Shao ordered a full-scale assault on the city walls, hitting both the front and rear gates with battering rams. The people of the city, having been besieged on this isolated island of a city for half a month without news of any reinforcements, had already given up hope, and they were at last unable to withstand an army one hundred thousand strong. Taking advantage of the flaw by the back gate, Jing Shao's forces breached the city walls in one fell swoop. As the army began to charge in, Jing Shao ordered the main forces to

remain outside and took only his five thousand Vanguard Battalion soldiers into the city, leaving strict orders not to disturb the civilians.

They rushed directly to King Xinan's estate but were unable to find hide nor hair of him; the only ones still there were his concubines and several common-born sons whom he hadn't favored, gathered in the courtyard, sobbing and wailing.

Jing Shao tried questioning them, but none of them could tell him anything. Then, a small child around six years old timidly said, "Grandfather left with a few uncles several days ago."

Mu Hanzhang crouched down to ask the child questions in his gentle voice, and that was when they realized that this was King Xinan's legitimate-born grandson. King Xinan likely had a secret passage in the residence, but in his haste to escape, he'd left this grandson behind.

"Your Highness, what should we do?" Hao Dadao jammed his Primordial Blade upright into the ground with a loud clang.

"Search for a secret passage, then escort this child and King Xinan's other common-born sons back to the capital. Set all his concubines free. The main forces will remain outside the city and make camp, while my Vanguard Battalion will regroup inside King Xinan's estate. This Prince will ask His Majesty for more instructions before making further decisions." Jing Shao methodically set out these instructions, and Hao Dadao left with his orders.

Mu Hanzhang stood in the courtyard, scrutinizing King Xinan's home. The buildings and waterside pavilions in the front court were similar to the architecture of Jiangnan, while the inner court featured Xinan's unique bamboo buildings, densely packed together. He found them fascinating.

“Come on, let’s look around and see if there’s anything good around here.” Noticing Mu Hanzhang’s interest, Jing Shao wanted to wrap an arm around him, but the armor he wore would prevent it. Instead, he grabbed one of the consort’s smooth hands and led him toward King Xinan’s main courtyard house.

King Xinan’s main courtyard complex featured the common red pillars and glazed tiles of official buildings. It had likely been built during the founding of the empire, with an inscription by the founding emperor himself above the main hall, bearing these bold and powerful words: *Loyalty and Righteousness*.

The house’s furnishings were all askew, probably made that way by his concubines rummaging for valuables.

“Anything valuable has probably already been taken,” Mu Hanzhang said, staring at the red sandalwood base on a table that had likely once displayed some kind of jade carving ornament.

“That is not true,” Jing Shao said with a mysterious smile. “What’s really valuable is often something that you can’t take with you.” He’d plundered plenty of vassal kings’ estates in his past life, so he’d learned the art of hunting down the good stuff. Holding his consort’s hand, he led him to King Xinan’s study.

Chapter 61:
Hidden Chamber

THE STUDY, TOO, had been turned upside down. Even the paperweight and the brush basin that should have been on the desk had been looted.

Mu Hanzhang walked over to a ripped calligraphic scroll hanging on the wall and pushed the damaged part back up into place. Once he realized what was depicted in the painting, he couldn't help but find it a shame. "Wanderer of Clouded Springs's paintings are priceless. What a pity that it was treated so poorly."

Jing Shao approached to examine it. It was just a landscape painting; he couldn't tell what was so special about it. Seeing that Jing Shao didn't understand, Mu Hanzhang gently explained it to him.

The Wanderer of Clouded Springs had been one of the Sixteen Wanderers in the previous dynasty, during which the appreciation of and artistry for calligraphy and painting had reached its zenith. The Sixteen Wanderers had been the best among those devoted to the arts, and they'd often studied and painted together. However, due to the turmoil at the end of that age, few of these paintings had been preserved.

Mu Hanzhang took down the ruined scroll and rolled it up carefully. Perhaps if he found a professional restorer to mend it once they returned to the capital, it could be returned to its original state. "This painting is worth far more than jewels. Why didn't King Xinan take it with him?"

“This generation’s King Xinan is someone who doesn’t know a good thing when he sees it. Come with me,” said Jing Shao, pulling his consort toward a partition inside the study.

The studies of wealthy families always had a small partition wherein a daybed would be placed for resting. This study was no exception, but it was on the small side, only able to fit a single bed, and it was unmade. The whole room looked rather bleak; even the jade pieces sewn into the bed’s pillow had been pulled off.

“No doubt the servants in King Xinan’s Estate also made off with quite a few things,” Mu Hanzhang said, looking at the curtain rope absent its gold hook.

“Once the tree falls, all the monkeys that lived in it scatter. Everyone has to survive somehow, don’t they?” Jing Shao smiled and brought down the bed veil in one smooth motion, revealing a bumpy wall.

He jumped onto the bed and said to the man behind him, “Junqing, step back a little.”

Mu Hanzhang followed his instructions and backed out of the partitioned area. He looked on as Jing Shao raised one leg and kicked hard at the uneven wall.

There was a great boom as Jing Shao smashed his foot through the wall, breaking a great big hole in it. Wooden splinters were sent flying, keying Mu Hanzhang into realizing that the wall had actually been made of wood, coated with a thin layer of bricks to disguise it. The dust settled to reveal a room hidden behind it, but it was too dark to see what was inside.

Jing Shao took out the flame stick lighter he carried on him and lit the candlestick on a small table. He then ducked through the hole and quickly lit

the candles on the other side before reaching to accompany his consort in.

Mu Hanzhang glanced around at the windowless room that was the hidden chamber. There was a black Buddha statue on a high platform that looked to be around five feet tall, with several meditation cushions placed below, and in the very center of the room, there was a square bronze cauldron surrounded by wooden shelves. Many items on the shelves were missing, but four or five scrolls still remained, sitting in a porcelain pail. A few long boxes sat on the shelves, and some scattered jewels lay in the bronze cauldron. Pearls and broken pieces of jade had been strewn everywhere.

First Jing Shao went to the wooden shelves to rummage through the long boxes. They were all old and worn, containing all kinds of fancy daggers and long swords. But there was one shabby, tattered box underneath all the others, and he opened it to reveal what appeared to be a rusted weapon in its sheath. It was either a slim knife or a short sword. Finding this, Jing Shao breathed a sigh of relief. Fortunately, even though he was living this life a second time, King Xinan was still the same undiscerning King Xinan.

“Li’l Spoon, come look over here!” Mu Hanzhang called out to him, noticeably excited.

Jing Shao picked up the old weapon from the box and sidled up to his consort to look at the scroll he held. The art depicted on it was quite strange; it had all the common elements of paintings—plants that grow in the earth, creatures that fly in the sky, beings that swim in the sea—with each drawn in a different style, making the whole thing peculiar. “What is this?”

“The Nine Songs Played Sixteen Ways! This is a group painting made by the Sixteen Wanderers!” Mu Hanzhang was ecstatic. The Sixteen Wanderers only ever created one painting together their whole lifetimes—this

was well and truly a masterpiece worthy of being preserved for generations to come. It had vanished during the previous dynasty, but it had somehow ended up in King Xinan's estate and even been abandoned in his haste. "Just this painting alone is worth at least two thousand taels of gold."

"It's kind of hard to take a calligraphic scroll with you when you're running for your life." Jing Shao laughed and rolled up the scroll that, to him, looked rather ugly.

"Take a look at this." He offered Mu Hanzhang the rusty blade. After taking it, Mu Hanzhang found he couldn't draw the blade no matter how much he tried. The hilt seemed to have rusted into the scabbard.

Jing Shao took his hand and pressed lightly on the side of the scabbard. With a click, the latch opened, and he slowly unsheathed the weapon.

The flat of the blade was crimson, gleaming with a metallic luster that wasn't from metal, and it seemed like jade, yet it wasn't made of jade. It had the dark richness of agate, and even in a dim room, it remained as dazzling as a sunset's blaze.

"It's so beautiful." Even though Mu Hanzhang had no particular fondness for blades, he still couldn't help exclaiming this in admiration. Nothing had been carved into it, but the smooth and radiant blade all by itself was beautiful enough.

Jing Shao took a fallen hair off his consort's shoulder and placed it on the blade. "Blow on it."

Mu Hanzhang glanced at him and smiled. "A blade so fine that it can slice through hair with a breath is just a legend. Do you really expect a weapon like that to actually exist?"

Smiling, Jing Shao leaned in close by his ear and asked, “Then why don’t we make a bet? If it really can do that, what do I get as a prize?”

Seeing him so certain, Mu Hanzhang grew curious too—and so he actually did blow at the hair.

“Hey, we haven’t decided on the stakes yet!” Jing Shao frantically tried to pull the blade away, but it was too late. The fallen hair touched the thin blade and immediately split into two pieces before slowly drifting to the floor.

“It really is a sacred weapon!” Mu Hanzhang was amazed to discover that such a thing actually existed. He turned to look at Jing Shao, only to find him glaring at him angrily. He couldn’t help but smile and reached out to pinch his cheek. “You’re so like a kid sometimes.”

“Hmph! Not only can this blade sever hair with a breath, it even cuts through iron like mud!” Jing Shao, who hadn’t managed to get anything out of the bet, was so furious that he swung the legendary saber toward the base of the black Buddha statue. With a clatter, one petal of the lotus pedestal fell away—sliced neatly off—and the two men froze on the spot.

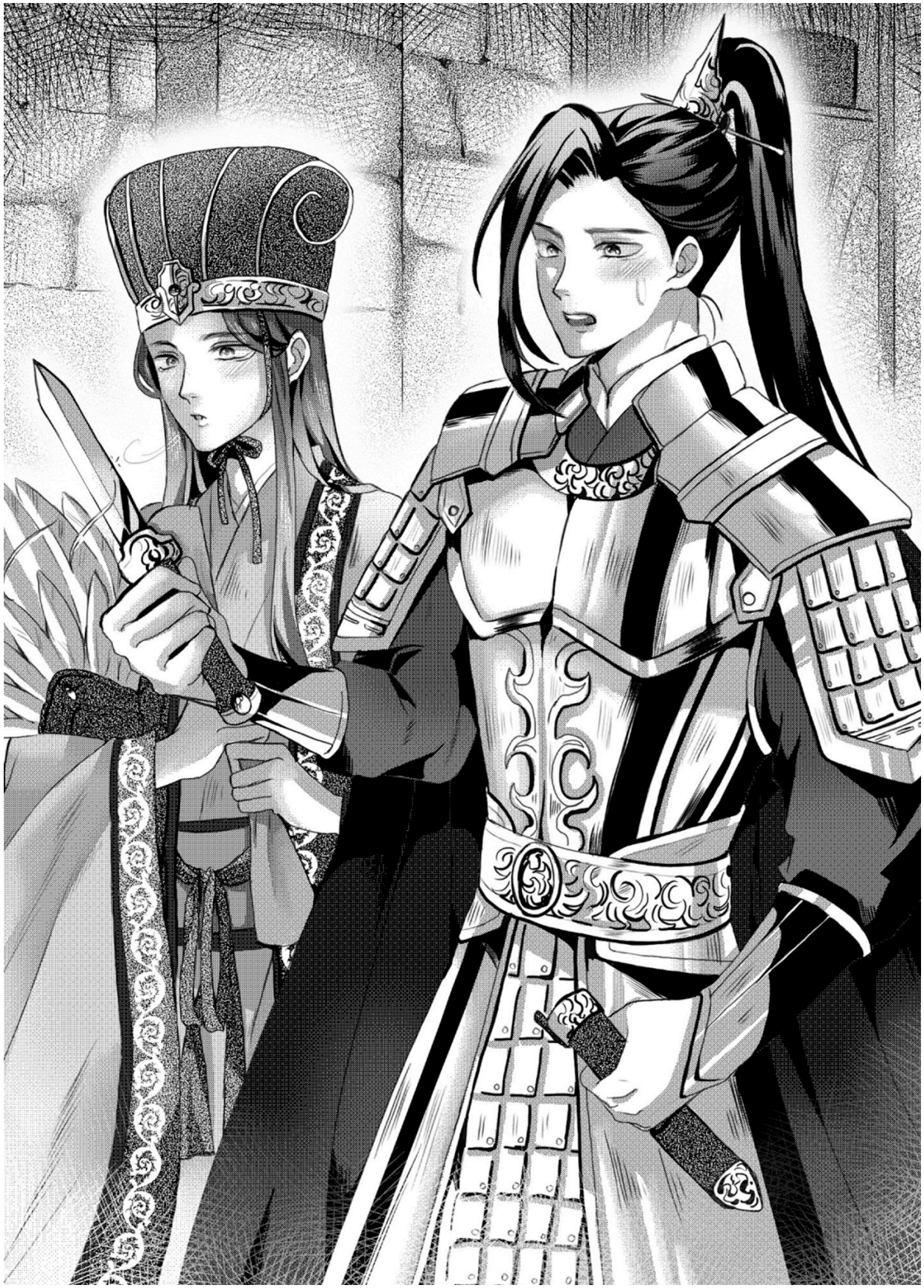
Under the thin black casing of the statue was a solid golden core; this five-foot-tall statue was made of solid gold!

The golden Buddha was so enormous that King Xinan couldn’t take it with him, so naturally, the two of them couldn’t pocket it either. They called over the soldiers to carry away the Buddha along with the ancient cauldron. This larger loot would be transported back to the capital under an armed escort.

Though Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang may have lost a whole statue of genuine gold, those old paintings and the legendary sword were things they

could carry off quietly.

Jing Shao guided his consort out of the hidden chamber so they wouldn't have to look at that Buddha statue and continue to mourn their loss of it. He finally understood how King Xinan felt when he fled, knowing full well that such valuable possessions were sitting right here but he was unable to bring them along. It was no wonder that he even forgot his legitimate grandson—he must have been worked up over the injustice of it all.



“I heard from the Right Guardian that you know how to use a blade,” he remarked.

“I only know some moves. With no inner force to back it up, it’s only good for protecting myself in an emergency.” Mu Hanzhang didn’t consider his skills to be very practical at all.

“Carry this saber with you from now on,” Jing Shao said as he wiped down the legendary saber. He hung it from his consort’s belt.

“A legendary weapon is probably useless in my hands, so why waste its legacy of glory on me?” Mu Hanzhang’s hand dropped to the hilt and lightly caressed it, his lips pressing slightly together. He had truly grown fond of this sword, but for it to end up in the hands of someone like him, who barely knew how to use one, was really a shame.

“This saber was meant to be yours,” Jing Shao said, smiling. He’d come to this hidden chamber to search for this blade to begin with—resembling jade rather than metal, as splendid as the glow of sunrise—of the Nine Sacred Relics of antiquity, this one was called Hanzhang, the Latent Radiance!

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IT WASN’T LONG BEFORE the soldiers who came to move the Buddha hurried back to them, urgently reporting, “Your Highness, there’s a secret passage under that Buddha!”

Jing Shao’s brows drew together. In his past life, he’d slain King Xinan while he was fleeing, so he’d never tried to figure out where the secret

passage was. This time, King Xinan had escaped in advance and vanished without a trace. If they followed this secret passage, they'd probably be able to track him.

He tasked some of his soldiers to hunt down King Xinan posthaste. The passage was narrow, and the going was slow; it wasn't until dusk that he got word that the passage emerged from a dry well three miles east of the city. King Xinan had left deep, clear wheel tracks that pointed straight east, so he likely had something heavy with him.

"No doubt he's gone to throw himself under the protection of King Dongnan. The items inside the wagon must have been gold and jewels," Mu Hanzhang speculated.

"Your Highness, I'll pursue him with a thousand cavalry troops—I'm certain we can capture that old scoundrel alive!" Zhao Meng said eagerly.

Jing Shao pondered for a moment, then raised a hand to stop Zhao Meng. "There's no need to pursue him."

"Why not, Your Highness?" Zhao Meng couldn't make sense of it. It would be easy enough to kill or flay King Xinan as they wished, since he couldn't have brought many people with him. "Your Highness, cutting the weed without pulling out the root will lead to no end of trouble."

"If King Xinan isn't dead, then once he escapes into Dongnan, it'll be like releasing a tiger back into the mountains!" said Hao Dadao, who'd just finished getting the main forces settled, as he came in carrying the little tiger cub.

"Raaah!" Li'l Sunbeam immediately responded upon hearing the phrase *releasing the tiger back to the mountains*. His big eyes never left the

pouch hanging from Hao Dadao's waist as he persistently stretched his claws out toward it.

Mu Hanzhang took Li'l Sunbeam from him and stroked the downy fur on his head. "That mountain does not belong to King Xinan. As the sages once told us, two tigers cannot tolerate living in the same mountain."

Hao Dadao nodded. "Then we just let him go?"

"This Prince will make the final decision." Jing Shao didn't intend to say more and waved a hand to dismiss them. "There are many courtyard houses in this estate; for now, go pick any one of them to stay in."

Hearing this, the Right Guardian eagerly left. Those bamboo buildings in the inner court intrigued him, and he could barely contain himself from running off to explore them. Expressionlessly, the Left Guardian followed the Right Guardian's back with his gaze as he ran off, then he silently followed him out.

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ONCE MATTERS HAD BEEN squared away, Jing Shao took out the writing instruments and composed an urgent report, informing his father of Yun's capture and King Xinan's escape to Dongnan.

Mu Hanzhang quietly watched him as he wrote. The tiger cub lay back in his warm embrace and drifted off to sleep, soothed by his rhythmic petting. While Zhao Meng and the others may not have understood why Jing Shao chose to let King Xinan escape, Mu Hanzhang did. King Xinan was already guilty of treason and rebellion, and if King Dongnan were to harbor him, then

they would publicly be seen working together, rebelling against the imperial court. The army's morale was high, so now was the perfect time to march east to Dongnan. It was just that…

"Why are you so eager to attack Dongnan?"

Mu Hanzhang studied the recurring allusions in Jing Shao's report. The moment Emperor Hongzheng received this dispatch, he would no doubt send another urgent imperial edict of the same priority instructing Jing Shao to invade Dongnan without returning to the capital.

Many of Jing Shao's actions were quite peculiar—other people might not notice, but spending days in close proximity with him made things clearer. For instance, today with that secret chamber. If he hadn't known where it was in advance, how could he have found it immediately?

Chapter 62:
Letting Go

"I'M IN A HURRY TO GET HOME for the Spring Festival!" Jing Shao said, without bothering to look up. He'd have to deal with Dongnan sooner or later, and rather than dragging the army halfway back home only to be sent out again by an imperial edict, he might as well get this war done all in one go.

Drawing out the war against these two fiefdoms provided no advantages whatsoever. This was because the Shu troops, the Hunan regiment, and the Guizhou regiment had to be returned to their regions once the war was over, and these armies lived so far from the capital that they were of no use to him. What mattered most was the military authority in Jiangnan. Moreover, his experiences from his past life were actually rather useful, and it had taken him only two months to capture Xinan. If he could do the same in Dongnan, he really could get back to the capital in time for New Year's. Besides, there was a very important task waiting for him in the capital this winter.

Lowering his gaze to the sacred saber at his waist, Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. "How did you know about the hidden chamber?"

"Um…" Jing Shao's hand paused momentarily. *Drat!* He'd been so distracted by showing off for his consort today that, in his glee, he'd forgotten all about how he knew. He resumed writing, his expression locked to impassivity, and said, "That was mentioned in the secret records left behind by the founding emperor."

His ancestor was wise and mighty, after all, so if he simply gave said founder the credit, it could all make sense.

Mu Hanzhang silently observed Jing Shao's handsome profile. His justification for being aware of the hidden chamber was reasonable, for the founder had been the one who'd ordered the construction of this very estate, but then how was one supposed to explain the plans at Shengjing Pass and at the tiger and crane pass? The third silken pouch Mu Hanzhang had given Zhao Meng had been written according to what Jing Shao told him, and everything within had come to pass. However, he'd never seen Jing Shao receiving any messages from scouts or spies.

"Well then…" He parted his lips, only to press them together again. He didn't want to force Jing Shao to tell him what he didn't want to say, and pressuring him about it over and over again like this was ultimately inappropriate. Mu Hanzhang's eyes dimmed minutely.

After Jing Shao finished writing the letter, he realized that his consort hadn't spoken in a while. When he looked up at him, he met a pair of eyes deep in thought. He sighed, pulling Mu Hanzhang into his embrace.

"Mew…" The tiger cub in Mu Hanzhang's arms opened his eyes when he was jostled and let out a soft cry, nuzzling against his owner's chest.

Jing Shao grabbed him by the scruff and tossed him onto the long daybed. The cub had grown quite a bit over the past two months; if Junqing held him for too long, his arms would grow tired.

Mu Hanzhang chuckled lightly. "Why do you insist on being so strict with him all the time?"

Jing Shao rubbed his face against that warm chest unhappily. "It's not that I'm trying to keep things from you. It's just that I can't really explain it

either.”

Mu Hanzhang gently patted the head nuzzling against his chest. “Mm-hmm, I know.” Jing Shao’s feelings for him were crystal clear, yet the human heart was never satisfied… Just as he’d thought, Mu Hanzhang was simply too greedy.

Jing Shao sighed. His consort was too sensitive, and if Jing Shao didn’t explain things, he would end up overthinking everything. But even he didn’t understand something as mystical as rebirth, so how was he supposed to explain it?

After a long silence, just as Mu Hanzhang assumed that Jing Shao wouldn’t say anything else, a muffled voice suddenly came from the head at his chest. “Junqing, do you believe that ghosts and gods exist?”

Mu Hanzhang leaned back a little to create some distance and looked down at him.

“I had a dream.” Jing Shao frowned. Sometimes he also wondered whether his past life, or this life, was actually a dream. But the dream had been too long and too real and so unbelievable. “The dream gave me many hints—such as how fighting against the Southern Barbarians would be inadvisable or about the defenses in Xinan and other things like that. But not everything I dreamed about will necessarily come true, so…”

Mu Hanzhang looked at him with some surprise. He had assumed the source of his information was something he couldn’t speak of, but it had turned out to be a dream. But if it really was a warning from the heavens, then it all made sense. After all, no matter how good the source was, it was impossible for anything so terrene to be as thorough.

“I never meant to keep it from you. It’s just so bewildering that even I don’t understand it.” Jing Shao stared intently at the man in his arms, but in his heart, he was regretting telling him already. He should have made up some other reason. After he’d told him the truth like this, if Mu Hanzhang didn’t believe him, it’d actually make it seem like he’d made up some story to avoid telling him the truth, and what would he do then? “It doesn’t matter if you believe it or not. I’m just worried about you overthinking things. I…” He scratched his head in frustration. He could handle everything else with ease, but when it came to his consort, he just kept doing dumb things.

Mu Hanzhang gazed at him in silence for a long time, then slowly began to speak. His words were as light as a sigh. “Perhaps, in the unseen hands of destiny, there is divine will.”

Jing Shao’s eyes went wide immediately—he actually believed him! “Junqing, you— You believe what I’m saying?”

“I believe you.” Mu Hanzhang’s lips slowly turned up at the corners. Such a secret ought to be kept deep within one’s heart, kept even from his parents and siblings. Jing Shao had only told him this because he didn’t want him to overthink. How could he betray such sincerity?

He hadn’t said, “I believe what you’ve said,” but “I believe you”! As Jing Shao mulled over its implications, he felt his heart swelling so full with emotion that he couldn’t resist seeking out those soft lips and pressing his own firmly against them.

As they kissed tenderly and passionately, all the burdens weighing on his heart vanished immediately. It was the first time Jing Shao had tasted such a kiss that could intoxicate one to distraction.

If I gave you my heart to hold, you would know how much I yearn for you.[6]

They were both a bit breathless when the kiss ended. Jing Shao looked down at the man he held in his arms, his cheeks faintly flushing. The minute tremble of Junqing's lashes seemed to flutter over his heart, and its tickling, warm sensation made him lean in again to kiss those reddened lips once more, one roving hand slowly running over Mu Hanzhang's garments to deftly untie the sash, his calloused hand finally caressing that smooth chest, rubbing a thumb over one hardened nipple.

Mu Hanzhang trembled and pushed him away gently. He felt a nagging feeling, as if there were something he had forgotten to ask. "I think there was something else I wanted to ask you, but somehow it's completely slipped my mind."

Jing Shao smiled and crooked his fingers, pinching that bud between them and tugging it.

Startled, Mu Hanzhang let out a gasp and tried to say something else, only to have Jing Shao seal his lips with his own. Before he knew it, he found himself settled down on the soft daybed.

Jing Shao didn't give the man under him any chance to protest and swiftly peeled away the fabric that covered his chest, putting his mouth upon his skin.

Mu Hanzhang let out a moan and protested anyway. "Don't. Someone might come in…"

They were currently in King Xinan's main hall where the estate's affairs were usually managed, and it was possible others would arrive to

report to them at any time. Mu Hanzhang's alarmed gaze remained fixed on the wide-open door; he was extremely on edge.

Noticing that he was distracted, Jing Shao reached between his legs.

"Ah…" Mu Hanzhang bit his lip, holding back a moan threatening to escape him. He glared at Jing Shao, only to be met with the quickened breathing of the man on top of him.

"Junqing…" Jing Shao straddled him and ground against him through the fabric of their robes, leaning down to nibble on the shell of one ear. His heavy breathing heated the back of Mu Hanzhang's fair neck until it gradually turned pink. Thankfully, having found it cumbersome earlier, Jing Shao had stripped himself of his armor as soon as he'd entered the room. He reached into a pouch to retrieve a little container.

"You can't; not here…" Mu Hanzhang said, still anxious. What if someone saw them? He was entirely occupied with this possibility, and whatever he had been going to ask Jing Shao had been pushed completely to the back of his mind.

Jing Shao smiled and eased him over, turning him prone on the daybed to force his gaze away from the door. Then he wickedly said by his ear, "All you have to do is get a bit louder and they won't dare come in." As he said this, he pushed his fingers, coated in fragrant balm, inside of Mu Hanzhang.

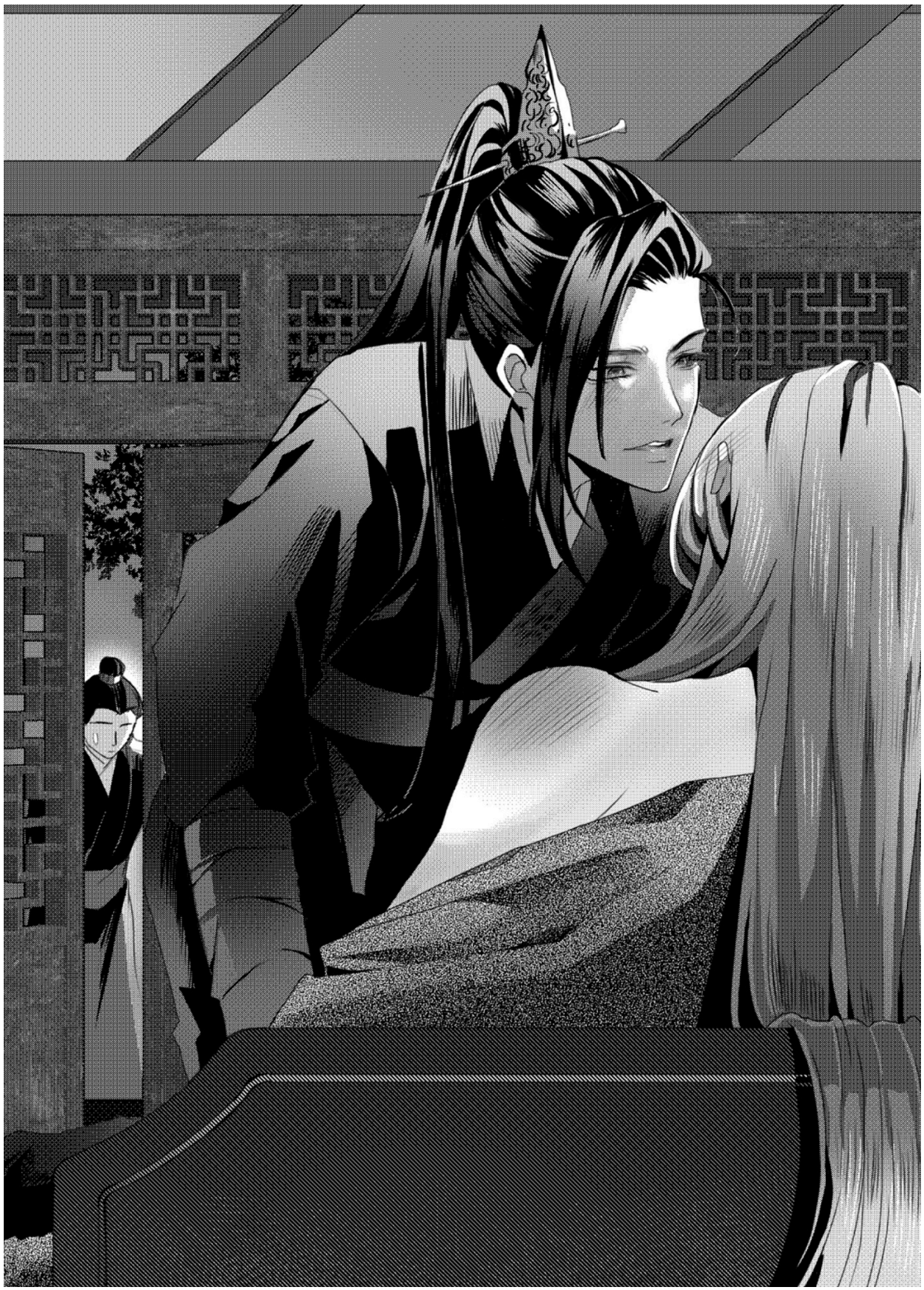
"Why, you— Ah!" Mu Hanzhang found his words cut off from surprise, the sudden intrusion of Jing Shao's fingers taking him off guard. He wanted to glare, but face down in bed, he couldn't make proper eye contact with Jing Shao.

The noise they were making leaked out of the room, and outside the door, Jiang Lang's mouth twitched. He stopped the clerk who was about to

enter with a document to deliver and quickly sent him away before closing the main hall's doors without looking up.

Jing Shao noticed Mu Hanzhang was still tense, which undoubtedly made it difficult for him to find this pleasurable, and such a terrible guilt flooded Jing Shao that he found himself unwilling to tease him any longer.

He pressed a kiss to a shapely shoulder blade and comforted him softly. "Don't worry—Jiang Lang is standing guard outside."



Only once Mu Hanzhang had gradually relaxed did Jing Shao feel confident enough to caress that lithe waist, parting those alluring rounded curves, then arching his body to enter him.

Mu Hanzhang immediately clutched the pillow sitting next to his neck. With the war keeping them busy and his healing injuries, they hadn't fully embraced each other like this in a fortnight. Now that everything burdening their hearts had been unraveled and their bodies reunited, it felt incredible once the pain subsided. Finding his own thoughts a little embarrassing, Mu Hanzhang buried his face in the pillow. Luckily, Jing Shao wouldn't be able to see his face from this angle.

Such an adorable gesture naturally didn't escape Jing Shao's notice. His eyes creased happily, and he felt compelled to grab onto that beautiful body for leverage and begin to move in earnest.

Jiang Lang was standing right outside the door. As a practitioner of martial arts, he had sharp eyes and keen ears and was clearly able to discern the incessant sound of wet skin slapping against skin. Coupled with the occasional gasp of pleasure, it made him blush crimson with embarrassment.

Bound by his duty, Jiang Lang was unable to leave, so the best he could do was to take a couple of steps away to gain some distance, but his imagination wouldn't stop painting a vivid picture of what was happening behind him. His family had been imperial physicians for generations, and he had heard much about the royal family since childhood; it was rare to find a couple as loving as Prince Cheng and his wife among them.

Watching the sun gradually sink beneath the western horizon, young Jiang Lang couldn't help feeling a little wistful. His father would likely arrange a marriage for him upon his next return to the capital. Too bad he was

a legitimate-born son; it would be wonderful if he could marry someone like Princely Consort Cheng.

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AFTER THEY'D MADE LOVE, Jing Shao carried his still trembling consort to a bath. Then he dressed them in fresh underclothes before instructing his guards to tidy up the inner chamber while he held his consort and rested on the daybed. Mu Hanzhang was quite fatigued, and leaning against Jing Shao's chest, surrounded by the clean, dry scent of Jing Shao's body, he quickly nodded off.

Watching the man sleep in his arms, Jing Shao let out a sigh of relief. Junqing must have forgotten what he was about to ask, right? The one thing he feared was that Junqing would ask if he'd had that dream on their wedding night and potentially suspect that he was only treating him well because of a divine revelation. That would be terrible.

"Raaaowr!" Li'l Sunbeam, who had been swept to the floor by Jing Shao at the very start of the proceedings, lay at the side of the daybed, clawing at the hem of his pants in protest.

Jing Shao rubbed the little tiger's head with the point of his toes, only to have his foot grabbed and gnawed on with gusto.

***

THEIR TIME IN THE XINAN FIEFDOM was rather peaceful, and after two months of fighting, their troops were finally able to catch their breath. The soldiers were all quite happy, but of course the happiest one of them all was Jing Shao, for he'd made the discovery that those many bamboo houses in the inner court were where King Xinan kept the beautiful women of his harem, and each house was built differently. One of them in particular was rather special—the entire room was filled with cushions and had likely been where King Xinan indulged in pleasure and fun.

Jing Shao ordered the room cleaned from top to bottom, and new cushions and blankets were laid down. Then, he proceeded to use the house to indulge in salacious revelry every day with his consort.

Mu Hanzhang played along at first but eventually realized that this man should not be indulged—the more he was allowed to have his way, he more he pushed his limits and refused to let Mu Hanzhang leave even during the day. In a fit of anger, he refused to enter that house again. He felt even more embarrassed when he saw the evasive way the Right Guardian avoided meeting his eyes and resolved to immediately move back to the proper main house.

Chapter 63:
Ambush

BLISSFUL, CAREFREE DAYS WERE always short-lived. It only took ten such days before an imperial edict reached the city of Yun, in which Emperor Hongzheng first lavished praise upon Jing Shao, then ordered him to immediately lead his troops to Dongnan to defeat King Dongnan for the crimes of aiding rebels and attempting to assassinate a prince. Also arriving with the edict was the viceroy of Liangguang, who had been temporarily dispatched to take over administration of Xinan.

Xinan had always been governed by a vassal king, and in order for it to properly fall under imperial jurisdiction again, there were a million things that had to be seen to. A secret order had been sent in advance by His Majesty asking the viceroy to take over before Xinan was even pacified, and he'd thought it would take at least a year or two, never expecting Prince Cheng to do it in only two months. The viceroy's peppery beard had turned almost entirely white from worry.

Jing Shao was very grateful that Father hadn't asked him to stay here and sort out the regional affairs. He patted the frowning viceroy on the shoulder, and without any sense of solidarity whatsoever, he broke camp and left that very same day.

***

THE DONGNAN FIEFDOM and Xinan were not contiguous but separated by Liangguang—which historically had been a place of exile. Its small population was spread throughout cities and towns that were separated by long distances, and it boasted beautiful vistas. The lofty crags of its ridged mountains and its clear streams and majestic waterfalls were dazzling.

The arrival of autumn heralded milder weather, no longer as sweltering. Whenever the scenery was good, Jing Shao would bring out Junqing from the carriage to ride Shadow with him. Since the little tiger cub had grown heavier again, Jing Shao refused to let him on, leaving him staring sulkily out through the carriage's window.

On one such occasion, when the Right Guardian saw how comfortable their strategist looked using their prince as a cushion to lean on, he became aware of the soreness in his own lower back from the past days of riding.

Noticing him fidgeting on his horse, the Left Guardian slowly approached. "If you're tired, you can ride with me."

The two of them often rode on the same horse so they could take turns sleeping in order to keep moving both day and night during a forced march. So, it wasn't like the Left Guardian had overstepped any boundaries by suggesting this. However…

The Left Guardian's words sent a shiver through him that bolted him wide awake. What the princely consort had said the other day—*"The relationship between myself and His Highness is much like the one between you and the Left Guardian"*—still lingered in his mind. He stared at the two sharing a mount in front of him, then swung his gaze to the expressionless

Left Guardian, and suddenly felt as though lightning had struck him through the top of the head, almost making him fall off his horse.

"Who said I'm tired? Get outta here!" The Right Guardian waved dismissively at the Left Guardian as if shooing a fly, then spurred his horse to catch up with Zhao Meng near the front.

***

DONGNAN WASN'T particularly far away, but with towering mountains to climb and deep rivers to ford, the journey took many days. It was more than a fortnight before they reached the Liangyi Mountains.

The *Book of Changes* has the supreme ultimate, which gives rise to the two modes.[7]

These two modes, known as yin and yang, were the Liangyi Mountains' namesake, a direct reference to the stark difference between the side of the range that faced the sun and the one shaded from it. The way it jutted out from the small hills of the Dongnan region granted it an especially imposing presence. When one stood at the foot of the mountains, it was as if they blocked out the sky, creating a stirring and unforgettable sight.

The Liangyis were a great big mountain range, and for Jing Shao, they held the most accessible path into Dongnan.

Mu Hanzhang sat in the carriage, his brow furrowing at the sight of the lofty peaks outside his window. The mountains here were so tall, yet all the

roads were squeezed into its valleys. This would be a dangerous place to run into trouble.

"Who'd come ambush us?! We're not inside the Dongnan Fiefdom yet," said Zhao Meng, who'd come over to chat. "We're still almost forty miles away."

"Perhaps I'm overthinking it." Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together and looked down at the *Commentary on the Classic of Clear Waters* he was holding.

The book noted that the Liangyis were the largest mountain range in the southeastern region, with the two peaks of Liangyi coming one after the other, forcing travelers to weave through the mountains. Jing Shao had told him that in the scenario from his dream, they hadn't traversed the Liangyis and had instead traveled from Jiangnan toward Dongnan along the coastal plains, so he had no idea what they might encounter along the way.

"Rowr!" Li'l Sunbeam, noticing that his master hadn't acknowledged his presence for quite a while, leaped onto the book in his hands. His sharp claws ripped through the page illustrating the Liangyis.

Mu Hanzhang retrieved the book from the cub's assault by lifting his paw, then flicked him on the forehead. He had already grown quite a bit already—though he had only been the size of a child's arm at first, he was now already two feet long, and his whole body had become much rounder. Mu Hanzhang pinched one paw pad, which had remained pink due to the little tiger's indoor lifestyle. It was soft and warm, so he couldn't resist squeezing it a couple more times.

Li'l Sunbeam compliantly sat there and let him knead his paws all he wanted. With one last scratch on the tiger cub's head, Mu Hanzhang looked

back down to read again. The tiger cub rubbed himself against Mu Hanzhang's leg and flopped down on his back, exposing his soft white belly. He peered at Mu Hanzhang upside down and batted at his book again. Mu Hanzhang smiled and produced a piece of jerky for him.

The horses of the army ahead suddenly neighed, and their carriage clattered to a stop. Mu Hanzhang braced himself against the carriage's wall, then raised the curtain in order to look outside.

The cavalry at the front of the army seemed a bit disordered; not too far away, their view was clouded with billowing dust, and the sound of approaching hoofbeats filled the air.

Sitting upright on his horse, Jing Shao looked coldly at the dark mass of cavalry before him, rushing headlong at his army through this narrow passage. He'd predicted that old rascal King Dongnan wouldn't just sit around and wait for death to come take him.

"Cavalry, fall back!" Jing Shao called out and raised a hand.

The foot soldiers behind him rushed forward, forming a phalanx of spears and iron shields; their weapons rang sharply as they fell into file, tightly blocking the mountain path. At the same time, archers lined up behind the shields and began to fire at the approaching enemy.

The Dongnan army's greatest strength was in their archery, so it was crucial to strike first.

From Jing Shao's men, thousands of arrows were unleashed at once, like a million birds suddenly taking flight. Once the thunderous volley tore through the sky, a chorus of chargers' neighs and soldiers' wails rang out through the valley.

The enemy hadn't expected Jing Shao to react so quickly. If he had been just an iota slower, they would have rushed past the range of the archers, but their path had abruptly been blocked.

It wasn't long before arrows from the opposite side began to rain down, but they couldn't reach as far as the cavalry, with only the infantry falling into their range. Gradually, foot soldiers began to collapse to the ground as they took hits. Jing Shao ordered the infantry to disperse and stand in the offensive-yoke formation, leaving half of the ground clear. The number of those taken out by archers decreased dramatically, but some inevitably fell under the onslaught.

Jing Shao sat firmly on his horse, unmoving. As the cloud of arrows from the other side began to wane, he said coldly, "Zhao Meng!"

"Here, sir!" Summoned, Zhao Meng spurred his horse forward.

"Take five hundred cavalry troops and break their archery formation!" Jing Shao raised his steel spear and pointed at the man in the center of the formation. That had to be the general leading them; the only thing he wasn't sure about was whether it was the same divine archer who had shot him in the 18th year of Hongzheng in his previous life.

"At your command!" Raising his saber, Zhao Meng charged out ahead of his men.

Five hundred horsemen formed a wedge shape, breaking through the foot soldiers' shield formation, and hurtled directly toward the enemy troops.

"Chaaarge!" Zhao Meng rode at the forefront, swinging his blade, cutting away the arrows bearing toward him as he surged forward recklessly.

Such a desperate assault inevitably sacrificed a number of troops. The Dongnan army hadn't expected this bold attack either. In order to give their archers as much range as possible, they had placed them at the front, and a last-ditch attempt to save them by rearranging their positions came too late.

When the enemy general observed the state of the battlefield, he also rushed forward, leading his calvary behind him, and for a time their battle cries seemed to shake the heavens.

"Charge!"

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MU HANZHANG DREW ASIDE the carriage's curtain and frowned as he assessed the battlefield. The enemy cavalry had broken through Zhao Meng's wedge formation and were closing in on their own infantry.

Jing Shao glanced at him. "Junqing, don't come out."

He gestured to the Left and Right Guardians, and the two immediately led their two squads a few steps forward. Though outwardly it may have seemed like nothing major had changed, the carriage was now firmly covered on all sides.

As the enemy cavalry rammed into the spears of Jing Shao's front line, melee combat broke out between the two groups.

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HAO DADAO WAVED his Primordial Blade and charged into the fray with his cavalry. With one slash of his saber, he took the head of the enemy's foremost vanguard, instantly boosting his troops' morale.

But then, the situation took an unexpected turn. A detachment of the Dongnan army appeared from the ravine at their left, cleaving the formation of foot soldiers behind Jing Shao's cavalry in two.

Jing Shao signaled for Hao Dadao to keep holding off the cavalry in front of him, while he spun his horse to turn back. The Shu commander behind him understood what he wanted immediately and led a charge with his infantry to block the enemy troops that hadn't yet galloped out of the stream, trapping them in the mountain crevice. The shallow waters quickly turned red with blood.

The sound of hooves galloping through water approached from afar, and from behind the enemy infantry, a squad of cavalry charged forward to break through those preventing their exit. Its valiant leader was unstoppable, killing three horsemen in a row, and, holding an Azure Dragon halberd aloft, he struck down toward Jing Shao's head.

Raising his spear, Jing Shao arched back and blocked the halberd's crescent blade. Then, with a twist of his wrist, he pressed sideways and down, pinning the halberd beneath his silver spear.

Mu Hanzhang sat frowning next to the carriage's window, watching Jing Shao clash with the enemy, worried beyond measure. Suddenly, a whistle pierced through the air: an arrow flying through the crowd, aimed directly at Jing Shao's back.

The Left Guardian drew his weapon and swiftly sliced through that ferocious arrow. So, it turned out that not only were he and the Right Guardian positioned to guard the carriage, they also happened to cover both angles from which an attack could be launched against the prince.

Mu Hanzhang secretly breathed a sigh of relief. On a real battlefield, he knew he couldn't be of much help, so he naturally wasn't about to leave the carriage and add to the chaos.

The man dueling with Jing Shao possessed exceptional martial arts skills, wielding his halberd with transcendent mastery; an abrupt upward thrust drove at Jing Shao's heart, but as Jing Shao let his silver spear slip to the crook of his elbow, he stopped it right in its tracks. With a shift of his weapon, he twisted the crescent moon of his enemy's halberd, and it flew toward its bearer's face. Startled, the enemy general drew back immediately to block it—he'd never imagined that despite this Prince Cheng's youth, he had already reached the point of uniting with his weapon. His silver spear was like a part of him, and each thrust and rebound was executed with remarkable precision.

The man angled his body to evade Jing Shao's attack, and as he rotated the blade of his halberd to its flat side, he drew it to his chest to shield him, wedging Jing Shao's smooth silver spear in between it and his armor, locking the weapon down—even as Jing Shao tried to wrench it free.

Jing Shao's lips curled into a sneer. He let go. The sudden release of Jing Shao's counterbalancing force caused his assailant to stagger back. In the blink of an eye, Jing Shao drew the sword at his waist and slit the man's throat. With his left hand, Jing Shao plucked his spear back up and struck the dying man in the chest, knocking him off his horse.

“Wonderful spear technique!” exclaimed Hao Dadao without thinking.

Having just killed the last of the cavalry, he’d turned back in time to catch Jing Shao’s last move. Such precision with a spear should have required more than a decade of dedicated practice, yet this Prince Cheng had already reached that level by the young age of twenty—truly a prodigy.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh! The sound of arrows piercing through the air sent alarm through the group still celebrating their recent victory. Jing Shao snapped his head around to find three arrows forming three points of a triangle, coming right at him.

Loosing three arrows with one shot—it was the divine archer!

Jing Shao’s eyes suddenly widened. In his past life, he hadn’t been able to dodge them because these arrows had been shot simultaneously; by the time they’d reached him, they had spread to form a triangle, blocking all possible angles of escape. Anyone being attacked like this would involuntarily turn to one side to get out of their path, but if they avoided one, the other two would hit them instead.

“Jing Shao!” Mu Hanzhang cried out in shock, able to do nothing but watch as the three arrows flew toward him. Yet Jing Shao stood still, without turning away and without dodging, simply letting the attack come straight at him!

Chapter 64:
Dongnan

THE BLACK ARROWHEADS gleamed terrifyingly in the sunlight. Just as all seemed lost, Jing Shao whipped his head away. The upper arrow brushed his cheek, carving a stinging, burning pain in its wake. As for the arrows below, one scratched past his silvery armor with a metallic screech, while the left one pierced into his arm!

Jing Shao let out a pained grunt and yanked the arrow out of his left arm. He then reached for the bow hanging from his horse's back, nocked the arrow, and shot it back in the direction it'd come from.

Had Jing Shao tried to dodge to the left, one of the arrows would've struck his heart; to the right and one would've pierced his lungs; arch his back and one would've gone through his throat!

The divine archer had never planned for what would happen should Jing Shao neither dodge nor evade, let alone have the wherewithal to counterattack. Still, he quickly nocked an arrow and shot it back. The two arrowheads collided. The greater force in the divine archer's arrow broke through Jing Shao's and penetrated three-tenths of an inch into its wooden shaft before both clattered to the ground.

The group had never seen such precise archery before, and for a moment, they simply stood there, stunned. By the time they'd come out of it, the divine archer had already wheeled his horse about and spurred it into a gallop, and the Dongnan troops who'd come to ambush them also quickly retreated.

Zhao Meng wanted to chase them with his cavalry, but Jing Shao put down his bow. “Do not pursue them.”

There were less than a hundred of the Dongnan troops left, and going after them through such a narrow mountain path might lead them into other dangers. It wasn’t worth it.

Hao Dadao sheathed his saber and regrouped his ranks, and noticing Jing Shao clutching his left arm, he walked over to check on him. “Your Highness, you’re hurt.”

Only now did Jing Shao feel the pain, and he drew in a breath with a loud hiss.

“Your Highness, please refrain from riding your horse any further, and let Master Jun tend to your wounds,” the Left Guardian said, his expression flat.

At this, Jing Shao leaped off his horse. He signaled the army to continue their march, then ducked inside the carriage.

Mu Hanzhang stared at the man before him and removed his armor without a word. After ripping open Jing Shao’s bloodstained sleeve, Mu Hanzhang dipped a towel in tea to wipe the wound clean. It was small, deep, and still bleeding relentlessly. Thankfully, it hadn’t reached bone, only piercing muscle. He picked up the hemostatic medicinal powder and sprinkled it on the injury without any hesitation.

“Ah, that hurts!” Jing Shao complained with a grimace.

Mu Hanzhang ignored him. Once he’d stopped the bleeding, he took out the small green-jade bottle and applied a layer of the ointment. He then

took the cloth bandages and carefully wound them around Jing Shao's arm layer by layer, finally tying a neat knot before releasing Jing Shao.

The injured man let out a soft breath. In his past life, when he'd attacked Dongnan in the 18th year of Hongzheng, he'd been hit by the triangular three-arrow shot of this very divine archer. Back then, he had instinctively attempted to dodge and ended up with one arrow right in his chest, almost costing him his life. This time, he'd remembered his lesson. By forcefully suppressing the urge to evade, he'd only suffered a minor injury and survived this ordeal. His heart, having been a little uneasy this entire march through the mountains, felt finally unburdened.

That his consort still hadn't shown any reaction hurt him slightly. He'd already been injured, and Junqing hadn't even offered him a word of comfort. Just as he was thinking of inching closer to take the initiative on his own, in the very next moment, he was unexpectedly swept into a warm embrace.

Mu Hanzhang wrapped his arms tightly around Jing Shao, and only then did the breath he'd been holding all this time slowly escape him. The touch of Jing Shao's warm, solid chest reminded him that he was still alive, safe in his embrace. What he'd seen earlier was far too close for comfort; when Jing Shao had been trapped by the three arrows, he'd felt as if the world had suddenly turned gray—he even forgot to breathe.

As a delicate fragrance wafted around him, and he enjoyed the warm, gentle touch, Jing Shao finally realized he was being held by Junqing! The slight curl at the corners of his mouth gradually curved all the way upward, and he reached out to hug his consort back, relaxing into his arms. Through two lifetimes, no one had ever held and comforted him when he'd been injured. He was suddenly overcome with emotion. If he had married a

woman, she would probably have been crying her eyes out right about now. Could a woman ever hold him this way and offer him so much support?!

The carriage continued to rumble forward as the army marched. Neither of the two men inside said anything, and the only sound was the clatter of wooden wheels on gravel.

"Junqing…" Jing Shao happily nuzzled against his consort's warm chest.

Mu Hanzhang gently stroked the head nestled in his arms, breathed out a sigh, and finally pulled himself together. Having just been in a battle, Jing Shao must have been both tense and exhausted.

As Mu Hanzhang looked down at the man in his embrace, he softly said, "You must be tired. Let me hold you while you sleep."

Jing Shao was naturally more than willing, but he was worried that he might be too heavy and Junqing would get tired from holding him for too long. He grabbed a pillow and set it down on his consort's thighs, then wrapped his arms around that lithe, slender waist before peacefully closing his eyes, that delicate scent lingering in his nose.

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EVEN THOUGH the Liangyis were big, they didn't take too long to traverse. Once they reached flat land, there were no natural fortifications to hide an ambush, so they were unlikely to run into danger again before reaching the Dongnan border. And so, in the following days, His Injured Highness happily nested in Master Jun's carriage with a clear conscience.

Li'l Sunbeam was quite dissatisfied with the way Jing Shao took up space. Given the tiger's current size, the two of them sharing the carriage to sleep was starting to feel cramped, so Jing Shao made him lie on the footrest rather often.

Meanwhile, Jing Shao grew rather fond of this tiger-shaped footrest pillow, and he often took off his socks to rub his feet on his orange fur. At first, Li'l Sunbeam chose to ignore this behavior, but if Jing Shao did it for too long, the tiger would turn around to grab his foot and bite it. Mu Hanzhang tried to discourage Jing Shao from doing it in the beginning, but after a while, he found it so amusing he actually started doing it as well—he even used jerky to make the cub flip over so he could rub his feet on his belly!

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BEFORE LONG, they reached the Dongnan border—an area made up of a series of hills interspersed with several rocky mountains. Stony ridges stretched on endlessly, both high and low. From a distance, they appeared as endless, repeating sets of ridges, which was why the locals called it the Overlapping Peaks.

Dongnan wasn't desolate like Xinan and was abundant in resources, boasting a large population. Although King Dongnan was tyrannical and lecherous, he was no slouch when it came to warfare, and he had numerous capable generals under his command. In this hilly terrain with ridges layered over each other, even though it could be said to have no natural barriers, it

could also be said that barriers were everywhere one looked, and an ambush could be hidden anywhere!

Jing Shao led his army through successive battles for almost a month and still didn't manage to move even close to forty miles. The war slowed to a standstill.

On the map before him, the rolling hills occupied nearly half of the Dongnan Fiefdom. Jing Shao sighed. With winter about to set in, even if he were to seize the main city immediately, he probably still wouldn't make it back to the capital in time for the New Year's.

"War is not child's play. How could it be that easy?" Mu Hanzhang pushed a cup of tea in front of him.

"Yeah…" Jing Shao sighed again. The campaign against Xinan had gone too smoothly, and it had made him a little impatient.

"Are you in a rush to get back to the capital because you have something important you must do?" Mu Hanzhang sat beside him and glanced around; the tiger cub had run off somewhere.

"It's nothing major," Jing Shao said, chuckling. "It's fine if I get someone else to do it." At any rate, he'd left instructions for Ren Feng before leaving the capital if he couldn't make it back in time.

Mu Hanzhang raised an eyebrow. Judging by the look on his face, it was probably something inappropriate. He shook his head in resignation and went out to track down the tiger cub.

By the river on the camp's perimeter, Li'l Sunbeam was standing on a rock, staring intently at the fish in the water. Under the gently rippling

surface, a great big silver fish swam gracefully as if dancing. It looked so delicious!

Mu Hanzhang caught sight of him just in time to see that big ball of black and orange fur pouncing into the water with a splash. He didn't manage to catch the big fish, but he did drench his entire fur coat.

The cub climbed back to shore and shook out the water in his fur. The weight of the water had flattened down the fur of his face, and he looked rather comical. When he looked up and saw his master, he joyfully bounded over.

Casting one disdainful glance at those big muddy paws, Mu Hanzhang promptly dodged to the side. He'd just bathed the tiger yesterday, and now it was all in vain.

"Raaaowr!" Having failed to catch any fish, the little tiger cub rolled onto his back at his owner's feet, exposing his belly and begging for jerky.

Close by, a war horn sounded. This was likely another crucial moment as the armies clashed.

"Junqing!" Jing Shao approached, here to bring his consort back to have lunch. When he saw Mu Hanzhang's attention drawn away by the sound of the horn, he led him to a small mound nearby. Far away, the armies from opposite ends of a battlefield crashed into each other. Dust billowed, and the air was filled with earth-shattering cries.

"If you keep fighting like this, you'll likely lose a lot of troops." Mu Hanzhang frowned as he stared at the distant battlefield. "Have you heard any word from Ruoyi lately?"

Jing Shao wrapped his arms around Mu Hanzhang from behind. “No. She must be in a difficult situation. But from the very start, I told her not to try to send any messages out of the estate.”

Ge Ruoyi was a concealed weapon he’d hidden by King Dongnan’s side, so she couldn’t afford to be exposed doing something so minor as passing information. If she did anything to reveal her intentions, she would be abandoning her mission to chase after small gains, and the cost would far outweigh any benefits.

“Hmm?” Mu Hanzhang suddenly exclaimed in surprise. Jing Shao followed his gaze to find the Dongnan army, who’d had the upper hand in this battle, suddenly retreating. By the position of the sun in the sky, it was only High Noon; to retreat at a time like this meant something must have happened internally within the Dongnan army.

Mu Hanzhang turned to Jing Shao and said, “We should head back.”

Jing Shao nodded and took his strategist by the hand, and they returned to the command pavilion. Soon after, a messenger came running back to camp.

“Repooort!” The young officer rushed into the command pavilion and knelt. “Reporting to the marshal, the Dongnan army has suddenly withdrawn. General Hao requests instructions on whether to pursue them.”

Jing Shao pondered for a moment. Although one should not pursue a cornered foe, judging by what he’d witnessed on the battlefield, it didn’t feel like a ploy.

“Pursue!” This simple one-word command hit the floor with a bang. The messenger immediately accepted this order and galloped off on his fleet-

footed horse.

As ordered, Hao Dadao gave chase, found the Dongnan army thrown into disarray, and cut them down without hesitation. It wasn't until nightfall that he returned to the base camp, his armor soaked in blood, having immediately entered the command pavilion to report on his findings before cleaning up.

"Judging by the way the Dongnan army is acting, something major must have happened." Hao Dadao wiped at the blood and grime staining his face. "Marshal, I believe that no matter what happened, this is the perfect time to annihilate the Dongnan army."

Jing Shao sat quietly and listened to Hao Dadao's report, unable to stop his heart from racing with excitement. It felt just like the moment he'd learned of King Dongnan's death in his past life.

A furrow slowly appeared between Mu Hanzhang's brows. He took Jing Shao's hand to suggest that he not say anything rash, then told Hao Dadao, "Good work, General. Please get some rest. We will decide what to do tomorrow."

Giving chase at night was futile. Hao Dadao suppressed the excitement in his heart, and after cupping his fist in salute, he left the pavilion.

Chapter 65:
Treasure Trove

ONCE HAO DADAO WAS GONE, the two couldn't help but exchange a glance.

"Do you think it's because Ruoyi succeeded?" Mu Hanzhang let go of Jing Shao's hand, but Jing Shao quickly caught it again and started to play with his fingers.

"It seems likely." Jing Shao took that radiant, beautiful hand and held it up to his lips. "Whether or not that is the case, with the Dongnan army in chaos, it presents us with a wonderful opportunity."

Mu Hanzhang nodded. "If King Dongnan really is dead, are any of his sons capable of taking over?" If one of his descendants had a head for strategy and took King Dongnan's place, the army would at best be in disarray for two days before it was brought back into order.

Jing Shao shook his head and chuckled. "King Dongnan is only around thirty, and even his eldest son isn't old enough. Moreover, when he was younger, he had his only legitimate-born brother murdered to secure his position as the heir. There's no one left who can succeed him."

Dongnan was located by the seaside and had grown rather prosperous due to customs duties from the maritime trade as well as its abundant resources. This had led to the decadence of its royal family, who'd overindulged in hedonistic luxuries until they became oblivious to the passage of time. If ever a descendant arose who was as capable as this generation's King Dongnan, he purged them all in one fell swoop. As a result

of this, now that King Dongnan was dead, they could find no one able to immediately succeed him.

Mu Hanzhang breathed a sigh; nature's law and moral order were inescapable, and karmic retribution always got the last laugh. King Dongnan's clan reaching this point was entirely their own doing.

Jing Shao sent scouts ahead to the Dongnan base army camp overnight to gather information, and a messenger came back at dawn to report that all the higher-ups in the Dongnan army had been in discussions throughout the night, showing clear signs of distress. Meanwhile, the soldiers in camp were still ignorant, unsure of what had happened.

Jing Shao ordered Hao Dadao to move ahead with his troops at once while he himself led the rest of their forces, following behind to mop up.

Hao Dadao led the troops and fought all the way to the Dongnan army's base camp. When he saw that they'd already started to break camp to retreat, he loudly proclaimed, "King Dongnan is dead! Surrender quickly, and you will remain citizens of the Chen Empire. Otherwise, you'll all be deemed traitors!"

Hearing this, the Dongnan army erupted in an uproar—from the time their commanders had received the news to this morning when they'd announced that the army was to pack up and return to the city, everything seemed too suspicious, putting the soldiers in a state of panic.

"Hao Dadao, cease your nonsense." The divine archer, surprised and furious, notched an arrow angrily and shot it at Hao Dadao.

To everyone there, the commander of the opposing side reacting in such a way only cemented the news of King Dongnan's death.

Before the arrow had even left the string, Hao Dadao signaled for his troops to move, leading them from the front. “Charge!”

The army rushing in obscured the divine archer’s line of sight, and having lost his target, he floundered for his next move.

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BY THE TIME JING SHAO had caught up with him, the divine archer had already been slain by Hao Dadao’s Primordial Blade, and Hao Dadao was off chasing his fleeing detachment, leaving Jing Shao’s main forces no choice but to continue advancing.

The hilly terrain of Dongnan made for a bumpy ride in a carriage, so Jing Shao dragged the strategist out to share his horse, leaving the little tiger to tumble around all by himself.

The news of King Dongnan’s death spread through the army like a plague; morale crumbled, and their commanders lost the will to fight to the death, allowing Hao Dadao to advance all the way to Dongnan’s main city Fu, the floating city on water.

Some oblivious descendant of King Dongnan must have been eager to seize power, for the estate was draped in white cloth, and the main hall had been redecorated into a mourning hall. Under their current circumstances, the death should have been kept secret and troops sent to hold the front line. But alas, these people were in such a hurry to display their filial piety that they’d even demanded that the frontline troops return to defend the city. The news

quickly spread, and the spiraling morale of the army flagged beyond recovery.

Jing Shao's main forces breached the city, and the populace fled in terror. He instructed his soldiers not to disturb the civilians, and as before, only brought his Vanguard Battalion into the city.

The house of King Dongnan hadn't prepared to flee well in advance like the house of King Xinan. They were all still in a state of panic as the army surrounded the compound.

Gathering King Dongnan's family members in a single small courtyard, Mu Hanzhang checked through them one by one but was unable to find hide nor hair of Ge Ruoyi, which made him a little uneasy. Before she left, she'd promised him that she would not do anything foolish and wait patiently for their arrival if she could. But now, her chances seemed slim.

"My lord! My lord! I was taken into his harem by force! I'm innocent! My lord, please take me away from here—I'll do anything, even if it's just menial labor…" A woman dressed in mourning robes suddenly rushed forward and threw herself at Mu Hanzhang's feet, crying as she surreptitiously fixed her hair, purposefully putting on display her beautiful profile under the cover of a casual gesture.

Mu Hanzhang looked down immediately, but she was not the one he was searching for, and he frowned despite himself.

"Scram!" Jing Shao, who was behind him, flew into a rage and kicked away the woman clinging to Junqing's robes.

She screamed and rolled off into a corner. She had noticed the extraordinary bearing of these two and figured that even if they weren't princes, they were high-ranking officials or nobility. If she could catch their

eye, she could continue to live a life of luxury. After observing them for a while, she'd thought Mu Hanzhang seemed gentler in temperament and would be easier to approach, but she'd never imagined that the one behind him would react in such a way.

"Come on, if Ruoyi were here, you know she'd come out to greet you herself." Jing Shao wrapped his arm around his downcast consort and led him out of the courtyard. Each of the women in this courtyard was enchanting and seductive in her own way, and none of them seemed trustworthy. It'd be troublesome if any more women started throwing themselves at Junqing.

"Did the hints in your dream say that Ruoyi would be all right?" Mu Hanzhang looked up to find Jing Shao visibly annoyed and couldn't help but find it rather amusing. He was a man too, so how come when he was faced with a courtyard full of beautiful women, instead of being filled with tender affection at the sight of them, his head was filled with rage?

Jing Shao's footsteps faltered, and a memory from his past life unfolded in his mind's eye as he recounted it: It had been a room full of white silk much like this one and filled with so many crying voices that it made his ears ring, save for one young woman laughing heartily in the middle of the crowd. King Dongnan's son had charged at the woman in an attempt to kill her, but Jing Shao had stopped him.

She'd said, "Your Highness, would you be willing to listen to a story?" Then she'd recounted her past in great detail before drawing the sword hanging from Jing Shao's belt and taking her own life.

Mu Hanzhang's beautiful eyes dimmed when he heard this.

"That was just a dream. It's hard to say how things might turn out now." Jing Shao sighed softly and pulled his consort into his embrace. "King

Xinan did defect to Dongnan, but King Dongnan had him killed. So now, both of the fiefdom's treasures are in this estate. Let's go check it out."

Everything in the residence had remained intact—even the servants hadn't had the chance to flee yet. Aside for some ornaments placed in conspicuous spots, all the valuables were still here.

King Dongnan hadn't shown the same fearful caution as King Xinan when it came to storing his treasures. He had instead built a treasury for everything that stood right in the bamboo grove of the main house's courtyard.

As they walked through that lush bamboo grove, a massive stone chamber came into view. The stone door was heavy, and the ones standing guard here had already been replaced by some of Jing Shao's vanguard. Jiang Lang stepped forward to greet them as they arrived.

"Reporting to Your Highness; there is a huge lock on this stone chamber, and it can only be opened from the inside." Jiang Lang seemed quite troubled. His Highness had instructed him to go guard the treasury, and he'd studied it for a long time before figuring out its mechanisms.

Mu Hanzhang stepped forward and studied it for a moment, then turned to Jing Shao. "No doubt a secret passage leads into this stone chamber from elsewhere."

Jing Shao nodded. The other end of the secret passage was likely in King Dongnan's bedchamber. Just as he was about to send someone over to check, there was a loud grinding of stone on stone—the door to the locked chamber was opening all by itself!

Jiang Lang quickly stepped back to shield the prince and the princely consort. Sunlight shone into the stone chamber, illuminating the dust motes in

the air, and someone slowly stepped out from the dark and gracefully got on her knees. A pink gauze garment outlined her alluring figure. She wore no jewelry or makeup, and her hair was undone, yet it didn't diminish her beauty in the slightest.

"I, Ge Ruoyi, respectfully welcome the prince and princely consort!" Her once pure, bright voice sounded a little hoarse, no doubt due to the lack of water and food in the stone chamber.

"Ruoyi!" Mu Hanzhang stepped forward to help her up. Although a little haggard, the woman before them undoubtedly was Ge Ruoyi.

Staring at the handsome, refined smile of the princely consort, Ge Ruoyi couldn't hold back the tears that filled her eyes. She had thought she was done with living after she'd killed King Dongnan, but she had remembered how earnestly the princely consort had entreated her before she left. If there was anything that still tied her to the mortal world, then it had to be that she still hadn't repaid the prince and the princely consort for their benevolence!

Seeing his consort so happy, Jing Shao was naturally happy in turn. He tasked Jiang Lang with taking Ge Ruoyi somewhere she could rest up, then gleefully entered the stone chamber with his arm around Mu Hanzhang.

The candles were lit one by one, revealing the contents of the chamber.

Never mind the full cases of gold ingots and silver bars, jade and other semiprecious stones, and jars full of south sea pearls—just the countless antiques, calligraphic scrolls, and legendary weapons were enough to dazzle the eye.

"Li'l Spoon…" Mu Hanzhang said slowly, "We…we've struck it rich…"

Although in theory everything here had to be handed over to the national treasury, these items were yet unclaimed, and those who found the spoils could share in them!

Jing Shao cleared out one of the large boxes, and with much enthusiasm, he started to pick out good things with his consort to stuff in it.

Mu Hanzhang still had some rationality left, and he stopped Jing Shao from looting indiscriminately. He took down a small box instead, around three feet long.

"That other box is too conspicuous. Even though it's an unwritten rule that you get first pick, you've simply achieved too much this time. It's only natural that others will try to find fault with you, so it would be better to be cautious."

Even though Mu Hanzhang hadn't learned enough from his mother to master the art of identifying and appraising treasure, he was still more than capable of telling which were worth more.

Mu Hanzhang's meaning suddenly struck Jing Shao; the value of treasure didn't lie in its quantity, but in its quality. Growing up in the palace, he had seen all manner of valuable items, so of course he understood this principle.

Take that walnut-sized dark green jade pixiu, for instance. That would be more valuable than the mutton fat jade Buddha hand, half a foot tall. And the polished jade hair stick of the moon and flowing clouds was worth far more money than the exquisitely crafted swaying gold hairpin.

Jing Shao picked up the hair stick. It was a rustic, simple piece with minimal embellishments. The stick itself curved just enough to look like flowing clouds chasing the moon, and the jade it was carved from was lustrous and smooth. Most importantly, it was meant for men, so it was perfectly appropriate for his consort to wear.

He walked over and gently inserted it into Mu Hanzhang's hair. He was wearing a green jade headpiece today, and two green tassels hung down by his dark hair. Paired with the jade moon and clouds, it was a perfect match.

Mu Hanzhang turned back to look at him, excitement shining in his beautiful eyes which matched the crystal glass in his hand—sparkling and radiant and stunning. Jing Shao couldn't resist leaning in to kiss him on the eyelid. "What are you doing with this glass?"

"It probably came from overseas." His kiss tickled, making Mu Hanzhang laugh and lean away slightly. People rarely made glasses out of crystal in the Chen Empire. The item in his hand wasn't just unique for its material; its shape was rather peculiar as well. "Something like this would surely fetch a fair price if we take it to the capital."

Jing Shao couldn't help but smile—his princely consort really did have business and money-making constantly on his mind. "Actually, overseas merchants often come to sell their wares these days in King Dongnan's fiefdom, so we can just buy some later. This stuff isn't valuable, so if you like you can take all of these glasses from the estate with you. In a few days, you can sell them once we're in Jiangnan."

"We're going through Jiangnan?" Mu Hanzhang looked up at him.

Jing Shao nodded. Since they wouldn't make it back in time for the New Year anyway, he might as well stay in Jiangnan with his consort for a while and take this opportunity to meet with that particular person.

Chapter 66:
Brined Bird

ONCE THEY'D FINISHED picking out all that they planned to pocket, Mu Hanzhang brought in the two guardians to help inventory every item in the treasury and enter them into a registry. Of course, finders keepers applied to the guardians as well, so the Left Guardian received a legendary sword, while the Right Guardian filled a bag with pearls. As for the other two generals, when they considered Hao Dadao's righteous and incorruptible nature and Zhao Meng's big mouth, the four of them unanimously decided not to tell them.

Jing Shao summoned a hundred soldiers to guard the treasury. Once everything had been thoroughly inventoried, he kept one case of silver behind, and the rest was promptly escorted to the capital.

In the memorial he submitted, in regard to King Dongnan's cause of death, Jing Shao directly stated that he had been killed by one of his concubines. As for which one, he simply wrote down the name of the woman who'd thrown herself at Junqing's feet the other day.

They spent more than ten days resupplying the army and recuperating in King Dongnan's estate. Once they'd received an imperial edict and finished handling the aftermath of the war, Jing Shao rewarded his men with the silver as the edict instructed, then disbanded the Shu, Hunan, and Guizhou troops from his army on the spot. After that, he led his own Vanguard Battalion northward toward Jiangnan.

After a period of convalescence, Ge Ruoyi fully recovered. She changed into a handmaiden's attire and returned to serving Mu Hanzhang. In regard to what she'd experienced over the past few months in King Dongnan's estate, she said nothing. Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang tactfully refrained from asking her even a single question.

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THE WEATHER HAD already turned cold. Traveling from the southernmost tip of the continent toward the north made them even more aware of the chill in the air. Since they were just traveling and no longer fighting a war, Jing Shao stopped trying to look tough and spent the trip holed up in the carriage under his consort's covers.

Due to the change in the weather, Li'l Sunbeam no longer had to serve as a footrest but was lying alongside them as a warm pillow instead. However, a living pillow posed certain challenges…

"Junqing…" Jing Shao planted tender kisses on Mu Hanzhang's nape, trailing down to nibble softly on those exquisitely shaped collarbones.

Mu Hanzhang moaned and whispered, "Don't… Ruoyi is just outside…"

"That's okay, we can be quiet," Jing Shao whispered back, right into his ear.

His slightly gravelly voice and his heated breath blew over the shell of Mu Hanzhang's ear, which made him blatantly shiver. Jing Shao smiled and moved to the other side to nibble on the other ear, and then…he saw a furry

paw reaching over toward the jade hair stick, batting it this way and that, pulling at it with a claw, this way and that…

Jing Shao stared at it speechlessly.

So did Mu Hanzhang.

And so, Li'l Sunbeam, once again, was relegated to sleeping on the footrest.

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THOUGH JIANGNAN in the Twelfth Month could not compare to its vibrant Third Month, where flowering trees bloomed like a bolt of brocade, its withered lotuses and bare willows had their own kind of charm.

The city they ended up staying in was named Pingjiang. It wasn't the largest in Jiangnan, but it was the most prosperous, and the Jiangnan regional commander was also headquartered here. Since this town was up against the border of the Huainan Fiefdom, the Jiangnan army was also stationed outside this same city.

Even though the regional commander didn't come out to greet them himself, he seemed to have made arrangements for them, because the Jiangnan army stationed outside the city had prepared a place where they could make camp. Leaving his Vanguard Battalion in the Jiangnan army's base camp with Zhao Meng to watch over things, Jing Shao took his consort along with Hao Dadao and the two guardians to the regional commander's estate.

Jing Shao started yelling as soon as he walked into the regional commander's residence. "Brined Bird! Get out here for This Prince right this instant!"

"Your Highness…" The steward who'd led the way pulled a handkerchief out of his sleeve to wipe his brow. Prince Cheng's sudden visit had surprised him, and he'd already sent a servant ahead to let his master know, so why hadn't he come out yet?

"What's with all the noise?!"

As soon as they stepped into the main hall, a man came in through the side door. He was tall, slender, and had a stern face. At first glance, he came off looking like a solemn scholar, but his voice was full and resonant, his footsteps sure and steady yet still silent. Hao Dadao quietly signaled to the guardians that this was a master of the martial arts.

Mu Hanzhang found the aura surrounding this man seemed somewhat similar to what he'd felt from Jing Shao when he first met him. He appeared to be around twenty. Mu Hanzhang had assumed that a regional commander would have to at least be above thirty and had never expected him to be so young.

Jing Shao and that man started glaring daggers at each other the moment they crossed paths, and the steward tactfully withdrew.

"Hmph, This Prince has graced Pingjiang with his presence, and yet the Jiangnan regional commander was actually at home taking a nap—what say you to this insolence?!" Jing Shao stared at him coldly.

"Hmph, Your Highness is calling a high-ranking government official by his childhood nickname. A man may suffer death but never humiliation! Tomorrow, this one will send a memorial to His Majesty—kill me or flay me;

do as you please!" The Jiangnan regional commander returned his words without backing down in the slightest.

Everyone seemed a little stunned.

Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but laugh aloud.

The commander's gaze fell on that mild-mannered, refined person, then he approached him to introduce himself in that resonant voice. "Greetings, Your Highness! I'm Jiangnan Regional Commander Lu Zhanpeng."

Mu Hanzhang smiled warmly. "My lord, there's no need for formalities. Thank you for your help with my business over the past year."

"Eh, now there's no need to be so formal. I didn't do you any favors—you covered the full expense every time," said Lu Zhanpeng with a smile. "His Highness and I grew up together, so you can call me—"

"Brined Bird will do!" Jing Shao interjected, coming to stand next to his consort.

Lu Zhanpeng's eyes went wide as saucers. "Your Highness, I am an official of the imperial government, yet you have time and again insulted me. A man may suffer death but never humiliation!"

"Enough, enough!" said Jing Shao with an impatient wave, tossing him a legendary weapon he'd taken from King Dongnan. "This Prince is giving that to you as a reward. Just thank me already."

Lu Zhanpeng took one look at the sword in his hand, and his eyes practically glowed. "This is indeed a good sword! Your Highness must have acquired an even better one—quick, bring it out and let me slit my own throat with it!"

Jing Shao finally burst into laughter and lightly punched the Jiangnan regional commander on the shoulder.

Once he'd introduced Hao Dadao and the two guardians to Lu Zhanpeng, Jing Shao dismissed them to run along and play on their own. Hao Dadao left with the steward to find a nice courtyard house to stay in, while the Right Guardian couldn't wait to explore Pingjiang, so the Left Guardian silently followed him out.

The regional commander of Jiangnan, Lu Zhanpeng, had been Jing Shao's childhood study companion. His family had performed as the defender-general of the state for generations. As a peerage, the defender-general of the state wasn't like a duke or marquis title—one had to distinguish oneself in battle before earning the right to be heir. Because he'd fought the Xiongnu with Jing Shao and made a name for himself that way, he was able to inherit the peerage, which was how he'd become the regional commander of Jiangnan at such a young age.

As Mu Hanzhang sat in the estate having tea while listening to the two of them trade biting, sarcastic jabs nonstop, he began to finally relax as well. This was the first time he'd seen Jing Shao act so freely in front of a government official, which just went to show how the friendship between these two really had been forged through surviving trials and tribulations together.

Watching the loquacious Lu Zhanpeng talk on and on, his youthful countenance still vibrant with life, Jing Shao recalled in his past life how the man had been stripped of his title due to being implicated by his connection to Jing Shao, turning white at the temples before his time. It felt like it had been a whole lifetime ago. Even though Lu Zhanpeng was telling his princely

consort all sorts of embarrassing childhood stories, Jing Shao couldn't even get angry at him.

"His Highness didn't want to study back then, and he could barely even read!" Lu Zhanpeng roared with laughter as he talked animatedly with Mu Hanzhang.

When they'd met for the first time as children, the old eunuch had told the third prince that this was the young son from the Lu family. So, young Jing Shao had asked him what his name was, and Lu Zhanpeng, who had just learned to write his own name, boastfully took a piece of paper and pretentiously wrote down the three large characters: *Lu Zhanpeng*.

Jing Shao stared at them for ages, yet he just couldn't recognize them. But he didn't want to get laughed at either, so when he recalled that the eunuch had said he was a son of the Lu family, he misread the Lu that meant "land" as the Lu that meant "brine," then recognized only the "bird" radical part of the character Peng, and read this out loud: "Brined…um, Bird!" And so, this nickname had stuck, and Jing Shao had called him that ever since.

"Enough, enough; you have such a dumb nickname and you still want to tell stories about it?" Jing Shao sneered. "I get embarrassed just thinking about what you did as a kid—who was it that went fishing with the embroidery needles from the palace maids and said that if you managed to fish out a koi, it meant you'd get to go from a humble fish to a mighty dragon—only to fish out a softshell turtle[8] instead?"

"How was I supposed to know that they kept softshell turtles in the imperial gardens?!" Lu Zhanpeng protested. Bent hooks were for fish, and a straight hook was for fishing softshell turtles, but as a young child he'd had no clue. He couldn't have predicted that he'd catch himself a turtle! He'd

ended up getting chased around and called a coward by Jing Shao for ages afterward.

Listening to these stories made the corners of Mu Hanzhang's mouth twitch. He finally understood why Jing Shao was still stealing eggs out of bird nests by the age of eight. With an unreliable study companion like him, it would have been a miracle if he'd managed to get any studying done at all!

"On a serious note," Jing Shao began, before lightly coughing as he took out a fifty-thousand-tael banknote for Lu Zhanpeng, "we'll be going back to the capital in a few days. I want you to buy a residence for me here in Pingjiang."

Lu Zhanpeng took the banknote from him and asked in confusion, "You want me to buy a residence here for you in Pingjiang? Are you planning to stay here long-term?"

"Don't waste time worrying about that; just do it." Jing Shao waved a hand to dismiss the question, not planning to explain anything to him.

"If you want to build a villa, just have the treasury allocate the funds for you. Why go through all this sneaking around?" Lu Zhanpeng said with a frown.

"You think the treasury is a bank and I can withdraw whatever I want from it whenever I want?!" Jing Shao asked irritably.

Lu Zhanpeng shot a look at him, and after pausing to ponder over it for a moment, he put away the banknote and lowered his voice. "King Huainan has always kept to himself and followed the rules. Will the imperial government still reduce his feudatory?"

Mu Hanzhang paused in the middle of pouring tea. Though the Jiangnan regional commander appeared to be both brash and loquacious, he was actually rather quick-witted and methodical in his thinking to have caught the meaning behind Jing Shao's words so quickly.

Jing Shao nodded without a word. Curtailing the feudatory was only a matter of time, especially since the Huainan Fiefdom was situated in Jiangnan, a wealthy region with a strong military presence—here was the true matter of pressing concern for Emperor Hongzheng.

Lu Zhanpeng's brow furrowed. "I've actually met King Huainan once before. That man is…" He considered his words carefully, yet he could not find the right ones. "…not to be taken lightly." Even after that pause, he was only able to come up with that description.

Jing Shao's lips curled up in a smile, and he swallowed a mouthful of tea but did not reply. He already knew that King Huainan could be a tough opponent. Not only was he a master of battlefield strategy, he was also both inscrutable and shrewd. If the imperial army hadn't had numbers on its side, there was no way the past version of Jing Shao could have possibly defeated him at all. With fewer troops, King Huainan had worn him down through the last of his years and almost dragged the imperial government to financial collapse.

However, being a tough opponent wasn't necessarily always a bad thing.

Smiling, Jing Shao took his consort's hand and stood. "It's still early in the day, so let's go out for a stroll. We'll be back in time for dinner—I want to have lake fish in vinegar gravy."

Though he'd been lost in thought only a moment before, Lu Zhanpeng snapped to, immediately taking offense. "You think this is an inn or something? Pay up, pay up!"

"I just gave you one hundred thousand taels of silver—what, that wasn't enough?" After he stretched, Jing Shao guided his consort out the door.

"That's money for building your house," Lu Zhanpeng grunted. Then suddenly he caught on and shouted, "What do you mean, a hundred thousand taels? It was clearly fifty thousand!"

Jing Shao hurriedly fled with his consort.

Mu Hanzhang's smile hadn't left his face since the moment these two men had reunited. Now, he really couldn't stop himself from laughing aloud. "You two are so funny together."

Jing Shao sighed dramatically. "If I stay in his house too long during the day, I'm sure I'd be nagged to death." He shook his head, and when he saw the gentle, elegant smile on Junqing's face, he sighed. "If I met you when I was a child, I would have definitely asked for you to be my study companion." Just imagine, if he could have held a tender little Junqing in his arms and heard him call him Li'l Spoon in that soft, sweet voice; it would have been such a wonderful moment.

Mu Hanzhang briefly froze, then chuckled softly and shook his head. "I'm a concubine-born son, so I wasn't even qualified to be your study companion."

Back then, the former empress had still been alive, so it went without saying how elevated Jing Shao's status in the palace had been. If a common-born son from the Beiwei Estate had been his study companion, it would

have been demeaning to his legitimate-born status. Besides, given Jing Shao's personality, he wouldn't have liked someone as quiet as he was when he was young.

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BONUS SCENE

The steward, who was unpacking Prince Cheng's luggage, opened the carriage's curtain.

Brined Bird: Eh, this tiger skin rug is quite fine. Take it to my room!

Li'l Sunbeam: *Rawr!*

Brined Bird: AAAHH!

Chapter 67:
A Fortuitous Encounter

THOUGH JIANGNAN WAS a land of beauty, it could be a bit bleak in the winter.

Rippling water flowed beneath low arched bridges, while sweet songs and soft accents drifted through the air. The two walked on a bluestone path hand in hand, wandering with no destination in mind.

They'd been in Pingjiang two days and had already visited all the must-see scenic spots. While the gardens they'd viewed were beautiful, they'd all been privately owned and weren't often open to the public.

"If you're running out of places to visit, sir, you can go to the Bamboo Retreat on the eastern side of the city for some music," said a vendor selling painted paper parasols.

"What's so special about it?" Jing Shao picked up one of his products, decorated with a blue phoenix, and showed it to his consort.

Mu Hanzhang nodded and paid the vendor.

The vendor smiled as he took the money. "While the Bamboo Retreat sounds cultured, it's not a teahouse."

He explained further that while usually you'd expect a place with live music to be a teahouse, the Bamboo Retreat wasn't. Although it truly was cultured, it did not serve tea—it served snacks, and its light refreshments and desserts were all quite expensive and all exquisitely prepared. The rich young men in Pingjiang who wanted entertainment but were not fond of pretending to enjoy tea all loved to frequent it.

Jing Shao was instantly intrigued; his consort had a fondness for cultured places, while he himself was a connoisseur of all kinds of snacks. A visit to this place would be the best of both worlds. And so, he took the hand of the man next to him and left for the eastern side of the city.

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THE BAMBOO RETREAT was definitely a place of cultured refinement. It was surrounded by layers of evergreen bamboo, and a single pebbled path led the way inside. The entrance of the bamboo grove flowed into a waterside pavilion made entirely out of bamboo, encircled by a burbling stream. Inside the pavilion, a songstress sat gracefully with a lute cradled in her arm, singing a local melody in a sweet voice lilted with a soft southern accent.

Sixteen open bamboo gazebos stood around the waterside pavilion in the eight cardinal directions, all of them equipped with a table, chairs, and heating stove, each gazebo only big enough to accommodate a single table. In order to maintain the appearance of refinement, although it was an establishment where light snacks were served, there were no noisy servers coming to take orders from the guests—one had to go behind the bamboo grove to order directly from the proprietor.

Perhaps because it was so cold, only five other gazebos were occupied when Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang arrived.

Plum blossom cakes fresh off the griddle, served with a steaming bowl of wontons, were truly an earthly delight. Mu Hanzhang held a piece of cake between his fingers. While it really was delicious, it was just too expensive—

a single plate of desserts and two bowls of wontons and they wanted a whole tael of silver for them! No wonder business was so terrible.

Jing Shao took a sip of the wonton broth. A savory and hot broth was especially comforting on a cold winter day such as this. When he looked up and found his consort staring blankly at his plum blossom cake, Jing Shao picked up Mu Hanzhang's spoon to scoop up a wonton, holding it up next to his mouth. "Come on, try it. Once it gets cold, it won't be as tasty anymore."

Startled, Mu Hanzhang automatically opened his mouth to accept the wonton between his lips without thinking. The delectable taste of it hit his tongue at once—perfectly seasoned, the meat tender and succulent, with a hint of sesame oil. Delicious!

Once his consort finally started eating in earnest and stopped agonizing over how much money it all cost, Jing Shao relaxed and finished all the wontons in his own bowl. Then, still hungry for more, he got up to buy himself another serving. In order to thoroughly enjoy their outing, the two of them hadn't brought along any attendants, and Jing Shao, who couldn't bear the thought of asking his consort to do anything for him, had to go get the food on his own.

While Mu Hanzhang was gracefully and intently eating his wontons, someone suddenly approached him from the gazebo next to theirs. His voice was bright and pleasant. "My apologies for the intrusion, sir."

Mu Hanzhang turned to the source of the voice and instinctively went still.

The man before him was clad in snow-white fabric from head to toe. Though it was a winter day, a layer of delicate gauze had been layered over his robes, and when Mu Hanzhang looked up from the contours of this

slender figure, he found the face of a beauty—with delicate features and eyes that turned up ever so slightly at the corners. However, the inscrutable smile that never quite reached his eyes made him seem a little dangerous.

"Do you need something, sir?" Mu Hanzhang stood, his hand involuntarily moving to the hilt of his weapon, thumb just over the trigger to its mechanism.

When that man got a good look at Mu Hanzhang's face, the upward curve at the corner of his mouth became more pronounced. "If I may be so bold as to ask—is this blade of yours the ancient sacred saber, the Latent Radiance?" Though he was asking about the weapon, his eyes were not on the blade but fixed on Mu Hanzhang's handsome face.

A slight furrow touched Mu Hanzhang's brow. "This saber was a gift from a friend. I was unaware of its name."

The Latent Radiance's hilt was worn and dull, and even after they'd had it polished by a silversmith, it remained unremarkable. This man must have been well-traveled and knowledgeable to know what it was right away.

"Can I take a look at it?" The man took a step forward, coming so close that he was almost right by Mu Hanzhang's ear, and in the very next moment, he was yanked away by the back of his collar.

Jing Shao had just made his way back out of the bamboo grove with a bowl of wontons when he saw some rake getting up close to his consort, and one of his hands was even reaching for his waist, sending Jing Shao into a seething rage. He tossed away the wonton bowl, ran over there, grabbed that man's collar, and threw a punch right at his eye socket.

The man had quick reflexes and raised a hand to block Jing Shao's fist almost by instinct. Jing Shao turned his fist and aimed for his chin instead,

but as soon as he got a good look at his face, he paused in surprise. He'd seen that face on and off for so many years that there was no way he could mistake him for anyone else. Here was the most crucial reason he had come to Jiangnan—King Huainan, Gu Huaiqing!

A moment's hesitation was enough for Gu Huaiqing to break free of his grasp. He moved his head out of the way, turned on the spot, and threw a quick punch toward Jing Shao's face. Jing Shao immediately raised an arm to block it, yet Gu Huaiqing's fist never landed. Instead, he pulled his fist back to his side just as quickly and jumped back within a split second.

Gu Huaiqing elegantly adjusted his clothing and his hair, looking coldly at Jing Shao. "It is hardly the behavior of a gentleman to throw fists without provocation." Two of the guards heard him from the nearby gazebo and swiftly came to his side.

Ignoring him, Jing Shao wrapped an arm around his consort to check on him. "Junqing, are you all right?"

Mu Hanzhang shook his head. "I'm fine." But when he turned and saw Gu Huaiqing acting all self-righteous, he lightly leaned into Jing Shao's arms, then soothingly patted his back, which had tensed up in his rage.

However, in Jing Shao's eyes, this consolation simply didn't feel right. Junqing rarely took the initiative to snuggle into him, so acting like this definitely meant that he must have felt humiliated by this man's advances! His barely subsided fury flared up once again into a raging bonfire. Even if this was King Huainan, Jing Shao was going to beat the hell out of him before he did anything else!

A brief look of astonishment crossed Gu Huaiqing's face. He hadn't been paying attention to anything but that sacred saber earlier, so he hadn't

noticed how these two had been behaving with each other at all. Displaying affection so openly in public—these two must have been lawfully wedded! Before he could say anything to apologize, Jing Shao was charging at him again.

Gu Huaiqing signaled for the two guards not to interfere and stepped forward to counter Jing Shao's moves on his own.

Jing Shao threw a punch aimed straight at his face, but once his opponent raised a hand to block it, he suddenly ducked and tried to sweep out his legs with a kick. As Gu Huaiqing leaped high into the air and kicked out toward Jing Shao, Jing Shao spun and kicked his leg aside, then lunged back at him.

The two were evenly matched in martial arts, neither able to gain the upper hand.

Mu Hanzhang stared, dumbfounded, as what began as a dignified duel gradually devolved into a dirty fight—eye-gouging, knees to the groin, until at last it spiraled into a messy, unskilled brawl with the two of them rolling on the ground.

The audience who'd come for the music gathered to watch them fight, but when they got closer, the two guards swiftly drew their swords and scared all those idle young noblemen so much that they beat a hasty retreat. When the proprietor heard the commotion, he hurried over to intervene—these two were causing such a ruckus that all his customers had left!

Mu Hanzhang stepped forward and gave him a south sea pearl as compensation, and the proprietor's worried, scrunched-up face broke into a beaming smile. "Take your time to spar, customers. Let me go make you a pot of tea!"

From the ground, neither of the two seemed to care how disgraceful their fight looked. They pummeled each other until they were bruised, their faces swollen and their breathing ragged, before they reluctantly pulled apart, rolling onto their backs amid fallen leaves, gasping for air.

Just as Mu Hanzhang thought they were finally going to call a truce, three breaths later, they exchanged a glance and scrambled at each other in unison. Their forearms locked together as they silently wrestled for dominance on the ground. Gu Huaiqing stared at Jing Shao, who was still trying to look fierce with bruised lips and blood oozing out of his nose, and finally couldn't help but burst into laughter, falling back from their fight.

"I didn't know you two were a married couple. If I've offended, my friend, feel free to punch me again!"

Jing Shao ignored him and got up. Then he kicked him.

Gu Huaiqing was speechless for a moment—wouldn't most people run with what he just said, end the fight right there, and call it even? This man was…really something else!

Mu Hanzhang walked up to Jing Shao right away and asked the proprietor for a towel to wipe his face. "I told you I was fine. So why did you start fighting again?"

"Hmph!" Jing Shao snorted, but the current situation seemed to have gotten rather out of hand, and he wasn't sure how to fix it.

He had planned to meet with King Huainan while they were in Jiangnan so they could discuss future plans, but he'd never expected to run into him here. Even though the two of them had fought against each other for so many years in his past life, Jing Shao had never thought of Gu Huaiqing as his enemy but rather as a once-in-a-lifetime rival—or even as a kindred spirit

that he'd long admired from afar! That was why he'd had other plans for the Huainan Fiefdom this time around. He'd never expected that things would develop like this the very moment they saw each other.

Gu Huaiqing picked himself up off the ground, rubbed his sore shoulder, then reached for Jing Shao's arm and said, "There's no better way to know someone than exchanging blows. I've never met anyone who resonates with me as well as you—let's become sworn brothers this very day!"

When he thought about the way this man had pulled every underhanded trick in the book during their brawl earlier, he realized that he'd never met anyone with such noble upbringing and martial prowess, yet who was just as shameless as himself! Truly a kindred spirit, rarely encountered even in a thousand years!

"Huh?" Jing Shao stared blankly at him for a moment. This King Huainan truly didn't play by the rules. How did they go from a brawl to becoming sworn brothers?

An imperial prince and a vassal king becoming sworn brothers; how was that supposed to work? Frowning, Jing Shao shot him a look. "You clearly aren't some ordinary commoner. Surely you can't just swear brotherhood with someone you just met?"

But Gu Huaiqing didn't even spare a moment to think; he instructed his guards to go get some candles and joss paper,[9] then he clasped Jing Shao's hand. "No matter who I am and who you are, a kindred spirit is hard to find. I'm set on making this vow with you today!"

Watching these two people trying to cling to dignity with their bruised and swollen faces, Mu Hanzhang finally couldn't hold it in anymore and had to cover his mouth to stifle a chuckle.

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BEFORE THEY KNEW IT, joss paper had been burned and a chicken had been killed for their blood oath. The winds of Gu Huaiqing's whims

quickly turned into rains of reality, and everything was put into place for the ritual. He grabbed Jing Shao and started making his vow.

"Heavens above, I, Gu Huaiqing, am here today with…" Gu Huaiqing got halfway through the vow holding a smoldering joss stick when he suddenly stopped himself and turned to him with a laugh. "My friend, I haven't even asked for your name yet."

Jing Shao let out a resigned sigh. Though this King Huainan was several years younger than the one he knew from his past life, he was still as unpredictable as ever. "Jing Shao."

The smile hovering at the corners of Gu Huaiqing's lips froze instantly. "Jing" was an imperial surname, so there weren't many people who had it to begin with, and the only Jing Shao who could possibly appear in Jiangnan at this time was none other than Prince Cheng.

Jing Shao mimicked Gu Huaiqing's half smile. "So? Are we still going to swear this vow or what?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't we?!" Gu Huaiqing snapped out of it and stuffed a joss stick into Jing Shao's hands. "Heavens above, I Gu Huaiqing, am here today to join in sworn brotherhood with Jing Shao. From this moment on, we'll share in blessings and hardships alike!"

Chapter 68:
Cooperation

AND JUST LIKE THAT, half bewildered and half going with the flow, Jing Shao took a vow of brotherhood with King Huainan. The three of them then hung out at the Bamboo Retreat for the rest of the afternoon, chatting as though making up for lost time. Their conversation took them from legendary weapons to battlefield strategy, from gourmet delicacies to beautiful maidens, and from idle gossip to literature, poetry, and songs. Only once the sun had started to wane did they say their goodbyes. Gu Huaiqing told them that he had been staying in the Wading Gardens in Pingjiang lately and invited the two of them to visit whenever they had the time.

As Gu Huaiqing watched the two figures depart, he stood with his hands folded behind him, and the smile gradually faded from his face. Prince Cheng and his consort each had their own strengths, and while they might not have posed much of a threat individually, together they were a near perfect combination—one with brains, one with brawn; one courageous, the other cunning. If he ever made enemies of these two, it would likely prove quite troublesome.

"My lord, are you returning to Danyang tomorrow?" a bodyguard asked as he led a horse over to him.

The city of Danyang was the main city of the Huainan Fiefdom; it wasn't far from Pingjiang, but it wasn't all that close either.

"Nah. Send a message back for me," Gu Huaiqing said as he stretched, then put on a smile again. "Tell them if it's not some dire emergency, they can

make decisions on their own."

The bodyguard choked on his spit—so if it wasn't a dire emergency, he'd leave it to his subjects to work out themselves, then what if it *was* a dire emergency? Naturally, they wouldn't be able to wait for word to reach Pingjiang! When the lord chancellor heard this message, he was probably going to get angry enough to pass out again.

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JING SHAO BEGAN THE WALK BACK to the estate with his consort. He hadn't noticed on the way there, but now that they were heading back, he realized how long this path was. It was getting late, and there weren't any stalls open where he could rent a palanquin. They walked for a long time on the bluestone path until Mu Hanzhang grew tired. Jing Shao brushed a hand over Mu Hanzhang's cheek, then crouched down and offered to carry him back.

"Oh, get up, it's not like I'm injured. It would be utterly unbecoming of me to let you carry me." Mu Hanzhang looked left and right; the vendors on the street had already packed up their wares, and the road was deserted. Only the music venue across the river on the opposing shore was still buzzing with excitement.

"Come up quickly, or I'll pick you up and carry you bridal-style," Jing Shao said, already starting to get up to grab him.

With no other choice, Mu Hanzhang climbed onto his back. He felt terribly awkward at first and wrapped his arms around Jing Shao's neck, a

little embarrassed.

Jing Shao grabbed those long, slender legs, stood up, and began to walk slowly along the sunset-warmed bluestone path. The sun's fading rays shone on the Qingshui River, serene and peaceful. He hitched Mu Hanzhang a little higher on his back and patted him on the bottom reassuringly.

With the rhythmic swaying of Jing Shao's footsteps, Mu Hanzhang gradually relaxed. Jing Shao's warmth seeped through the soft fabric of his robes, and his wide, broad shoulders felt nice to rest his chin on. Contentedly draped over Jing Shao's back, Mu Hanzhang let his legs dangle, swinging softly as they moved.

"Say, why do you think King Huainan wanted to swear brotherhood with you?" Mu Hanzhang asked, half lost in thought as he tilted his head to watch the glimmering light on the surface of the river.

"He's the hardest person to read ever," Jing Shao said, turning his head to nuzzle against his consort's cheek. "He acts on his whims, and his moods swing as fast as you can turn a page. He might have done it just because it amused him."

The man resting on his shoulder responded with a noncommittal hum, as though he was still thinking about it.

"Did you notice anything?" Jing Shao gave the person on his back a gentle shake.

Mu Hanzhang considered his words carefully. "He's worldly, well-informed, and exceptionally competent. He also seems easy to get along with, and he's always smiling. People like that are usually quite good at winning others over."

Jing Shao nodded. King Huainan really was worthy of being called worldly, well-informed, and exceptionally competent.

The regions of Xinan and Dongnan had already been pacified, so even though King Huainan appeared to have always minded his own business and followed the rules, making it difficult to find fault with him, knowing Emperor Hongzheng, it was inevitable that he would abolish this feudatory. Not to mention that since this war had gone so smoothly, it was likely to give rise to certain arrogant rhetoric in the imperial court. At most, another year might pass before an imperial edict would be issued to abolish the Huainan feudatory. If he could work with King Huainan, they could stage a mock war and drag out the conflict; this way, he could hold on to military power, and it would also provide an opportunity to make a profit, thereby saving some money for Jing Shao in support of his brother's bid for the throne.

"One must be cautious when negotiating with a tiger for its skin." Mu Hanzhang gave him a timely reminder, knowing what Jing Shao was setting out to do.

Jing Shao nodded. "I will exercise discretion." Nothing ventured, nothing gained. He had been planning on teaming up with Gu Huaiqing from the very start; even though that man was cunning and unpredictable, he also possessed great wisdom. Jing Shao smiled, then said, "A tiger doesn't necessarily always harm people. Just look at Li'l Sunbeam."

When he mentioned the cub, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but let out a soft chuckle. No doubt that dummy would happily offer up his skin as a blanket in exchange for jerky.

Twilight fell on the two of them, casting a single long shadow on the small bluestone path.

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THE VERY NEXT DAY, the two called on King Huainan at the Wading Gardens, taking with them another legendary saber from King Dongnan's treasury as well as their little tiger.

The cub was rather reluctant to go outside; such a cold day demanded that one stay in the house to nap, wrapped around a heating stove. Mu Hanzhang scratched Li'l Sunbeam's head. The little one had been sluggish ever since they got into the carriage. He must not have liked the cold.

"With fur so thick, what does he have to complain about?" Jing Shao pinched the fur on the scruff of the tiger cub's neck, finding it smooth and dense. This furball could get cold?

"I've heard that all lions are intolerant of the cold, so I'm sure that King Huainan's zoo must be quite warm." Mu Hanzhang stroked the tiger's little head. They were taking Li'l Sunbeam along because Gu Huaiqing had said he was keeping a lion at the Wading Gardens, which he'd recently acquired from a maritime merchant just this year. Since they were returning to the capital quite soon, they had to decide on their plans with King Huainan before they left, while Li'l Sunbeam served as their excuse for visiting the very next day.

Wading Gardens was the largest garden compound in Pingjiang, complete with many elegant terraces, pavilions, and lofty halls, but most important of all, it had hot springs.

“So, this is the tiger cub you’re raising?” Gu Huaiqing came out to greet them with a smile, reaching out to stroke Li’l Sunbeam’s head.

“Rowr!” Li’l Sunbeam exclaimed indignantly, baring his teeth and refusing to be petted.

“It looks pretty solid.” Gu Huaiqing shrugged off the cub’s reaction with a smile and led them inside. “That lion of mine doesn’t do very well in the cold, so I left him in the heated nook.”

Though he called it a heated nook, it was actually a covered courtyard filled with flowering plants, shrubs, and trees. A pool of water steamed with heat, warming up the area and making it quite cozy. However, there was a fence not far from the entrance that forbade entry. A lion cub about the same size as Li’l Sunbeam slept behind the fence while several rabbits nibbled on grass in a far corner, keeping their distance.

“If we put them together, they’ll probably end up fighting.” Mu Hanzhang looked down at the tiger cub as he peeked curiously through the fence, glancing at the lion pretending to sleep with his eyes closed. He had a feeling that their tiger would likely lose that fight.

“They’re still little—they won’t fight to the death or anything.” On the other hand, Jing Shao was quite intrigued as to what would result from their meeting. He picked up the tiger cub by the scruff and tossed him behind the fence.

“Waaahr!” The little tiger was surprised to find himself thrown in without any warning. He stumbled forward a few steps, then curiously got down on his haunches to watch the little lion not far away.

The lion opened his eyes, and when he realized that there was an intruder, he slowly raised his head. He didn’t get up, however, simply

watching Li'l Sunbeam warily.

"You have to keep these things feral when you raise them, otherwise they'll turn into house cats, and what would even be the point then?" Leaving the animals there, Gu Huaiqing led them to another heated nook to have some tea.

"We will have to set off for the capital the day after tomorrow," Mu Hanzhang said softly.

A full tea set had been set out before Gu Huaiqing, and without relying on help from his servants, he steeped the tea, rinsed the cup, checked the aroma, and tested it, performing this series of motions with fluidity and grace, and even when he heard what Mu Hanzhang said, his actions did not halt. The fact that this was all done with the dexterous hands of a martial artist made it a delight to watch.

He pushed two cups of tea toward them. "You have rendered outstanding service to the empire in quelling this rebellion, so you'll have to stay alert once you're back in the capital."

The couple exchanged a glance. Telling them this was meant as a gesture of goodwill.

"Elder Brother"—Jing Shao readily called him this after he'd paused to think—"since we've taken a vow of brotherhood, I'll speak plainly. Now that both Dongnan and Xinan have fallen, do you have any plans?"

Gu Huaiqing looked down and brewed his own cup of tea, a light smile playing on his lips. Instead of answering the question, he asked, "The empress consort dominates the harem, and the fourth prince is insolent and lawless. So, do *you* have any plans, Brother?"

Talking to smart people sure did save time. Their eyes met, and they shared a smile.

“Even though Huainan is modest in size, it has been managed by my ancestors for many years, so it’s still a force to be reckoned with,” said Gu Huaiqing, turning his gaze to Mu Hanzhang. But when he saw that charming, gentle face, his words went from serious to jesting within a beat. “The capital is quite unstable these days. If you find it too difficult for you to stay there, Brother-In-Law, you could always come find shelter with me.”

Jing Shao slammed his teacup on the table. “Didn’t we fight long enough yesterday?”

Gu Huaiqing rubbed his still bruised chin and smiled without a word.

“Elder Brother, if you ever find it too difficult to stay here, you are also welcome to come to the capital and find shelter with us,” said Mu Hanzhang with a gentle smile.

Chapter 69:
Returning to the Capital

JING SHAO'S HACKLES WERE quickly smoothed down by his consort's ever so smooth and natural mention of "us." He grunted, then didn't say any more.

Gu Huaiqing's expression remained unchanged, and he poured Jing Shao another cup of tea.

"Why, of course. The reason I wanted to become sworn brothers with Jing Shao yesterday was precisely because he looked at least wealthy and at most noble, and should I ever find myself with nowhere left to turn, I'd have someone who could take me in."

There was thick skin, and then there was this exceptional shamelessness. Mu Hanzhang smiled, resigned. He suddenly got the feeling that his prince still had some semblance of shame left.

As they were pursuing the same interests, it was easy enough to form an alliance. King Huainan asked Jing Shao about his future plans, and when he heard that Jing Shao was planning to push his same-blooded brother onto the throne, he was understandably a little surprised. Had this man done so much just to pave the way for someone else? He narrowed his slightly elongated eyes and considered the two people sitting opposite him.

Jing Shao peeled a small tangerine, split it in half, and handed one half to the person next to him. Mu Hanzhang took it, then casually helped him wipe the juice off his fingers.

Gu Huaiqing instantly understood. Slowly, a smile curled the corners of his lips, and he took a moment to savor his tea. The taste of bitterness tinged with a hint of sweetness spread out from the tip of his tongue. So, there really were people in the world who would forsake power for love! Suddenly, he found himself quite impressed by Jing Shao. It was rare to find those who truly knew what they wanted, especially when it came to the members of the imperial family—they wanted too much and often lost what was most precious to them before being overwhelmed by regret, just like the first King Huainan…

"You let go of what you know you should let go. As your brother, I am impressed." Gu Huaiqing raised his teacup. "I drink to you."

He had thought it would be a long day of going around in circles, but thanks to Jing Shao's candor and willingness to say things as they were, the wary King Huainan decided to trust him, and he also handed him a letter.

Jing Shao opened it, and with just one look he knew that such forceful and bold brushstrokes must have belonged to his father. The letter went on and on without getting to the point and was so filled with allusions to the classics that his head hurt, and so he handed it off to his consort.

Mu Hanzhang gave him an exasperated head shake and took it. He frowned. "What Father means to say is that two fiefdoms have already been pacified, but as Huainan has always been dutiful and compliant, and as there was an agreement between their ancestors, King Huainan should not think overmuch. However…"

Gu Huaiqing smiled. "Go on."

"There is this one line, though: 'Is it my own ruin that I fear? No, I fear the downfall of the imperial order.[10] '" Mu Hanzhang paused and looked up

at the man sitting across from them. “This line is likely laden with meaning.”

Jing Shao scratched his head, not quite understanding. Was Father not just using the words of the ancients to lament how he as an emperor spent his days carefully managing the affairs of the court, worrying that the Chen Empire might fall in his hands? And he’d said it to let King Huainan know that as an emperor, his hands were tied, hoping he might find consolation in these words. What else could it mean?

Mu Hanzhang handed the letter back to Gu Huaiqing and turned to Jing Shao. “Do you remember what line came before that one?”

“‘Those corrupt factionalists indulge in fleeting pleasures, yet the path they walk is treacherous and narrow,’” answered Jing Shao, who sat stunned for a moment as it suddenly hit him. What Father didn’t finish saying was that King Dongnan and King Xinan had formed factions to destabilize the nation, and it was a warning for King Huainan not to follow in their footsteps by walking down that treacherous and narrow dark path that would surely lead to his ruin.

“The Huainan Fiefdom has always paid its tribute on time, year after year. Even when the Qinhuai River flooded and inundated Danyang City, not even a thousandth of a silver tael has ever been withheld.” Gu Huaiqing put away the letter, a sneer on his lips. “Is His Majesty unable to find any fault with me, so he’s asking me to voluntarily offer up the fiefdom myself?”

“Elder Brother, you should consider yourself lucky that this rhetoric is only intended to test you,” Mu Hanzhang said, slowly running his fingers over the almost transparent white jade cup in his hand. “As time goes on, I’m afraid he’s only going to speak more and more plainly.”

Gu Huaiqing was two years older than Jing Shao, so he was older than Mu Hanzhang too. Calling him elder brother didn't cost him anything.

Gu Huaiqing nodded before turning back to Jing Shao.

Jing Shao thought about this quietly for a moment. "Just stall for now. Pretend you didn't understand him. Father knows Huainan's strength and won't resort to military action lightly."

Presently, the government was not yet ready to fight another war, and to start a conflict right now would give them no advantage. This was why he suggested that Gu Huaiqing take his time to reply, waiting for Jing Shao to return to the capital victorious before wasting time chatting back and forth with Emperor Hongzheng. Since Jiangnan was so far away, letters took a long time to arrive from the capital. For now, they could stall for a year or maybe two and make plans in the meantime.

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BEFORE THEY KNEW IT, dusk had arrived again. Gu Huaiqing wanted to keep them overnight at the Wading Gardens, but Jing Shao declined, worried that it might arouse suspicion. It wasn't until they were about to leave that he remembered the tiger cub they'd used as a pretext for their visit—they'd left him behind in the heated nook and forgotten about him all day.

When Mu Hanzhang walked up to the fence and found bloodstains on the tiger cub's face, he couldn't help but frown. "Were they biting each other?"

A servant in charge of watching over the animals immediately explained that it wasn't an injury. The lion cub had caught a rabbit in the afternoon, and since he couldn't finish it, he had given half to the tiger cub.

"Meow!" When Li'l Sunbeam saw that his master was here, he flipped over to show off his bulging belly. And when he did, his head ended up next to the lion cub sprawled on the ground, and the lion stuck out his tongue to lick off the blood staining Li'l Sunbeam's whiskers.

"Raaaowr!" Li'l Sunbeam turned over and pounced on the little lion, then started nibbling on his ear.

Mu Hanzhang felt a bit speechless—this guy! They'd wanted to bring him here so he could learn how to hunt from the lion, but wasn't he a little *genius*? He'd waited for someone else to catch food for him instead, living even more lavishly than he did at home.

Jing Shao muffled a laugh behind his fist. Then, he jumped the fence and picked up the little tiger cub even as he kept happily gnawing on the lion's ear, so that he would stop embarrassing himself. The lion immediately stood up and watched Jing Shao warily.

"Raaa!" The tiger cub waved his stubby paws, and like a child who wasn't done playing, he squirmed, protesting at having to leave, only to end up taken away forcibly by his master's husband.

***

TWO DAYS LATER, when they set off for the capital, Gu Huaiqing didn't come to see them off. Instead, he'd sent along a servant disguised as a

pastry shop worker to deliver several boxes of exquisitely made snacks for them to eat on the road.

Lu Zhanpeng didn't bring them any gifts and even stood before their carriage for ages nagging away. "During the half year you've been gone from the capital, your shop never brought me any money for your stock. When you get back, don't forget to make it all up to me—I need that money for the Spring Festival!"

"Since I haven't even been in the capital for half a year, and you've had no address where you could've sent me anything, what costs am I covering exactly?"

Perhaps it was because of his consort's influence, but Jing Shao was far more mindful about money than he used to be. The stock was usually sent along with Lu Zhanpeng's letters to Jing Shao, and since he hadn't been in the capital during the past half year, there had been no way for Lu Zhanpeng to send him any.

"Then what about all the expenses you incurred while staying at my estate? Also, I need to expense the provisions consumed by those five thousand soldiers and horses while they were staying in the Jiangnan base camp!" Lu Zhanpeng continued his argument with conviction.

"Food and fodder for our troops were separately accounted for; stop making things up." Jing Shao waved, shooing him away like a fly.

Mu Hanzhang smiled at the sight of the two bickering again. He recalled his little shop in the capital, which had been left under his mother's management during his absence, selling what inventory they already had. With New Year's approaching, it had likely run out of stock and closed its

doors by now. Since his mother had been made secondary wife, he hadn't heard from her at all. He wondered how she was doing.

"What are you thinking about?" Jing Shao leaned against the bolster pillow and wrapped his arms around Mu Hanzhang, who was daydreaming as he stared out the window.

Grabbed without warning, Mu Hanzhang almost dropped the snack in his hand. He quickly caught it and glared at the big guy who was moving around far too much.

"I was thinking about how cautious Gu Huaiqing was to gift us something that we can finish on the road so as to avoid arousing suspicion from those in the capital."

Jing Shao leaned in and, while Mu Hanzhang was still talking, took advantage of his inattention and ate the snack out of his hand.

***

THEY WERE ON THE ROAD for a fortnight. By the time they reached the capital, it was already the 13th of the First Month.

Outside the capital's southern gate, all the officials of the court had come out to greet him. Emperor Hongzheng stood on a tower on the city wall to reward Prince Cheng's Vanguard Battalion. As for those generals who'd contributed greatly to the quelling of this conflict, their reward would have to wait until tomorrow's morning assembly.

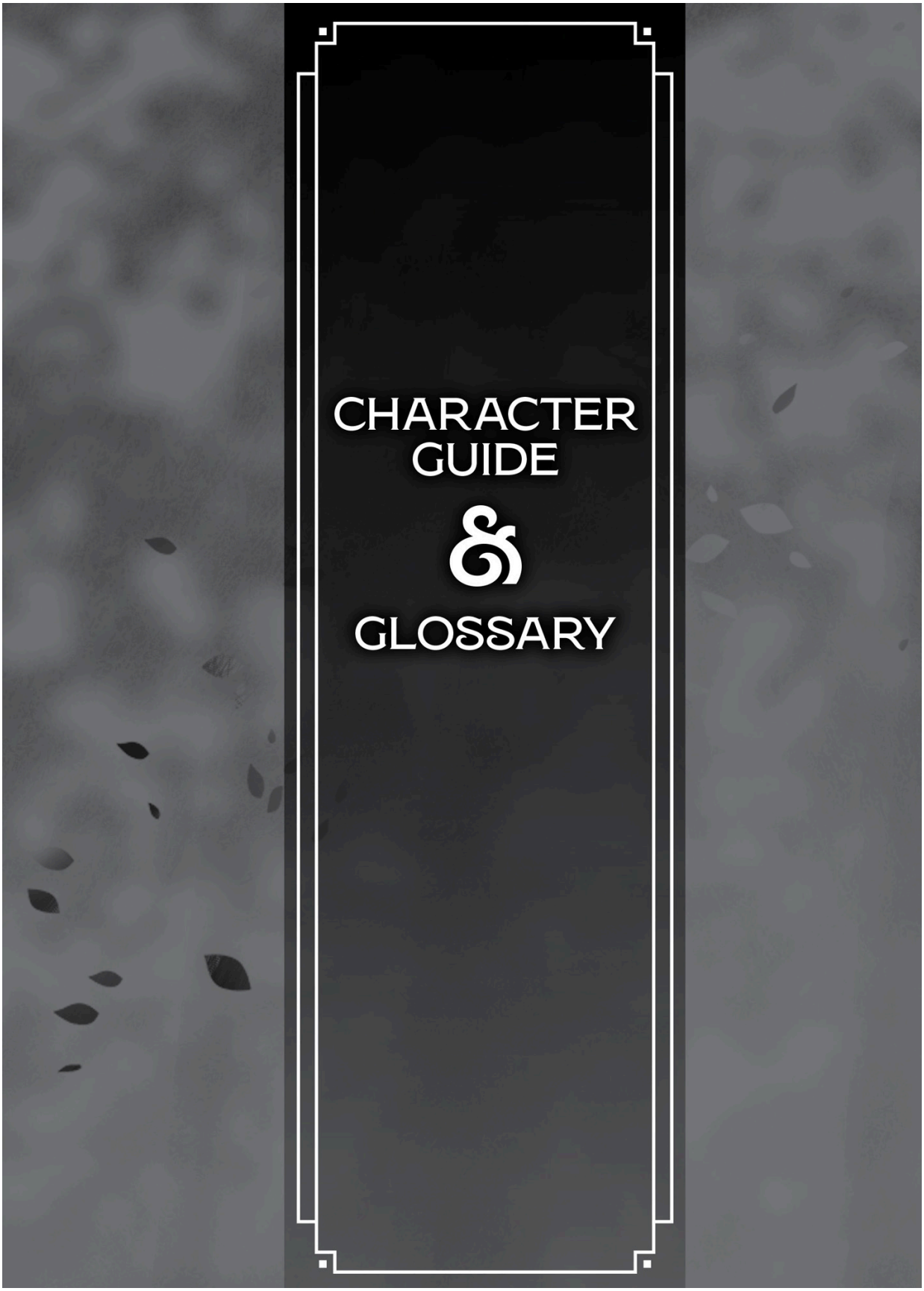
Troops could not be stationed within forty miles of the capital, so the two guardians led the army back to Qi County. Zhao Meng's residence was right here in the capital, so he simply went home. Hao Dadao needed to attend the morning assembly where he would be granted his promotion, so he went with Jing Shao to lodge temporarily in the Prince Cheng Estate.

The facade of the Prince Cheng Estate had been newly decorated, with great big lanterns hanging all along the wall. It seemed like Duofu and Steward Yun had thoughtfully made the estate fit for guests despite the prince being away from home. Even from afar, Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang could tell there was a great crowd of people gathered in front of the estate's gates.

"Welcome back, Your Highness Prince Cheng and Your Highness Princely Consort Cheng!"

The large group of servants stood in two rows. Apart from Yun Zhu, Yun Song, and a few handmaidens who waited on the couple closely, there was a woman standing in front of the handmaidens in conspicuously bright pink—it was none other than Song Lingxin, whom Jing Shao had completely forgotten about and all but abandoned in the west wing!

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
The Wife Comes First
VOLUME 3


CHARACTER
GUIDE
&
GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

JING SHAO 景韶: The third prince, granted the title of Prince Cheng at nineteen before any of his brothers for expelling the Xiongnu. Son of the former empress and Emperor Hongzheng.

MU HANZHANG 慕含章: Married to Jing Shao as Princely Consort Cheng. Courtesy name Junqing 君清. Common-born son of Marquis Beiwei. A provincial graduate at seventeen, known as the Erudite Gentleman among many young scholars in the capital.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

EMPEROR HONGZHENG 宏正帝: Emperor of the Chen Empire; a common-born son of a concubine.

EMPRESS CONSORT / LADY WU 吴氏: Elevated to empress consort after the late empress's death. Sister to Earl Yongchang.

JING CHEN 景琛: The second prince, Jing Shao's same-blood brother.

JING RONG 景荣: First Prince, common-born son of Emperor Hongzheng and a palace maid.

DUOFU 多福: A eunuch. Chief steward to Jing Shao's estate.

SONG LINGXIN 宋凌心 / MADAM SONG 宋氏: Jing Shao's secondary wife, daughter of Song An.

SONG AN 宋安: Vice minister of war, Song Lingxin's father.

MASTER YUN 云先生: Steward to the Outer Court of the Prince Cheng Estate.

YUN SONG 云松: Jing Shao's pageboy.

YUN ZHU 云竹: Mu Hanzhang's pageboy.

MARQUIS BEIWEI 北威侯 / MU JIN 慕晋: Mu Hanzhang's father.

CONCUBINE QIU 邱姨娘: Mu Hanzhang's mother.

MU LINGBAO 慕灵宝: Heir to the Marquis Beiwei peerage, legitimate-born.

DUKE MAO 茂国公: Jing Yu's future father-in-law.

EARL YONGCHANG 永昌伯: The empress consort's brother.

XIAO YUAN 萧远: Vice minister of revenue. Courtesy name Heng Zhi 恒之. Distantly related to the House of Dingnan.

NINE-BLADE GHOST 鬼九刀: A martial artist that works for Jing Shao, specializing in concealed weapons.

GE RUOYI 葛若衣: A young woman from Dongnan seeking revenge against King Dongnan for her brother's death.

ZHAO MENG 趙孟: A general of Jing Shao's army, a bearded brute of a soldier.

WANG ER 王二: A soldier in Jing Shao's army in the logistics camp.

LEFT GUARDIAN 左护军: A protector general for Jing Shao's army. Stone-faced and speaks little.

RIGHT GUARDIAN 右护军: A protector general for Jing Shao's army. Smiles a lot, talkative.

KING XINAN 西南王: Vassal king of the Xinan Fiefdom.

KING DONGNAN 東南王: Vassal king of the Dongnan Fiefdom. Ge Ruoyi has a vendetta against him for murdering her entire family.

JIANG LANG 姜朗: Imperial Physician Jiang's son, now one of Jing Shao's guards as part of his elite troops.

HAO DADAO 郝大刀: The descendant of a great general from the former dynasty, who ended up a butcher in the village of Shanxia. Now one of Jing Shao's subordinates.

VICEROY OF LIANGGUANG 兩廣總督: Appointed by Emperor Hongzheng to oversee the incorporation of Xinan into the empire.

LU ZHANPENG 陸展鵬: Jing Shao's childhood study companion and friend. The regional commander of Jiangnan. Nicknamed Brined Bird by Jing Shao due to a misreading of his name.

GU HUAIQING 顧淮卿 / KING HUAINAN 淮南王: Vassal king of the Huainan Fiefdom.

NAMES, HONORIFICS AND TITLES

Courtesy Names and Given Names

Usually made up of two characters, a courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only

tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in historically inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

Terms of Endearment

-ER: A suffix that literally means "son," but in practical usage, it is similar to the English suffix "-ie," much like turning "fish" into "fishie."

GEGE: A word that means "elder brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer.

JIEJIE: A word that means "elder sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

MEIMEI: A word that means "little sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ˇa, à) to

indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names from *The Wife Comes First.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

MÙ HÁNZHĀNG

"Mù" sounds like moo, with the fourth sharp tone."Hán" sounds exactly the way it looks, while rising a little in tone, like a question."Zhāng" sounds like Jang, with a flat "ah" in the middle.

JǏNG SHÁO

"Jǐng" sounds like Jing, and rhymes with sing, with a slight fall-and-rise third tone that makes it a little like a question. "Sháo" sounds like Shao, and rhymes with cow.

GLOSSARY

Measurements and Time

All measurements have been converted to standard imperial measurements, with the exception of the “tael,” which is only used for precious metals, and at sixteen gram per tael, it weighs a little more than half of an ounce. A lot of these are approximations; for example, the Ming dynasty’s 一斗 (one dou) is about 10L, or 2.64 gallons, and depending on the size and quality of the pearls, that can weigh up to 40lbs. Considering that these are high quality pearls, Jing Shao received forty pounds of pearls from the emperor.

The traditional Chinese day was divided into twelve dual-hours, with each hour named after the twelve Earthly Branches. During the Han Dynasty, more meaningful names were given to each dual-hour. There is some overlap with the late evening hours and night watches. When a time of day that denotes a specific dual-hour is given, proper case is used. When a dual-hour passes, the text is localized as two hours.

一更 FIRST WATCH: 19:00 – 21:00

二更 SECOND WATCH: 21:00 – 23:00

三更 THIRD WATCH: 23:00 – 01:00

四更 FOURTH WATCH: 01:00 – 03:00

五更 FIFTH WATCH: 03:00 – 05:00

子时 MIDNIGHT: 23:00 – 01:00

丑时 COCKCROW: 01:00 – 03:00

寅时 DAYBREAK: 05:00 – 05:00

卯时 SUNRISE: 05:00 – 07:00

辰时 BREAKFAST: 07:00 – 09:00

巳时 MIDMORNING: 09:00 – 11:00

午时 HIGH NOON: 11:00 – 13:00

日昳 AFTERNOON: 13:00 – 15:00

申时 WANING SUN: 15:00 – 17:00

酉时 DUSK: 17:00 – 19:00

戌时 NIGHTFALL: 19:00 – 21:00

亥时 DEAD OF NIGHT: 21:00 – 23:00

BOW, CURTSY, KOWTOW: A bow is at the waist, and how deeply the bow goes denotes the level of respect. Curtsies are done by women only, and a Chinese curtsy is done by forming both hands into orchids (thumb touching middle finger), placing both hands by the left hip, bending both knees slightly, and tipping the head. A kowtow is prostration, and involves kneeling, palms facing downward with fingers pointed at opposing hands in front of knees, then bending down until forehead touches the back of fingers. A half kowtow simply means the person bends down only halfway to the hands.

FOUR BOOKS AND FIVE CLASSICS:

Four Books: *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*

Five Classics: *Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *I Ching*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

These books form the core of Confucianism and are what students used to be tested on in the Imperial Examination system.

HORSE PLAGUE: The ancient Chinese way of dealing with contagious diseases is to collect bodies and burn them to prevent further spread of contagion. "Horse plague" was very likely anthrax, and at other times, equine influenza.

IMPERIAL EXAMS: Placements within the civil service are gained through participation in the exams system. Graduates at and above the provincial level are often given a modest stipend, a kind of fixed income, so that they can continue studying and perhaps participate in higher level exams, even if they don't hold an official position; Provincial Graduates can participate in the Metropolitan Exams, and Metropolitan Graduates can participate in the Palace Exams. Palace Graduates are announced on a "Golden List." The top three graduates of the Palace Exams are translated here as: Primus Scholar, Secundus Eye, and Tertius Flower.

INNER FORCE: An internal force that circulates through the meridians of the body, which is controlled by martial artists to achieve near supernatural physical feats.

LIGHTNESS ARTS: A kind of martial arts that allows one to practically fly.

MEMORIAL TO THE THRONE: A memorial is an official letter written to the emperor in essay format, and anyone has the right to submit one. In reality, memorials written by someone other than court officials and nobles were often rejected by the secretariat for improper formatting.

MIASMA: Miasma is a noxious vapor that rises from the ground and causes disease. Since the people of the Central Plains had never encountered tropical diseases before, when they came down with malaria, dysentery, and hemorrhagic fevers, they attributed it to these miasmic vapors that rose from the ground. In *The History of Eastern Han*, General Ma Yuan's encounter with the south's miasma is described thus: "Stagnant water below, fog above; poisonous vapor rises."

MILITARY RANKINGS: A lot of the rankings in this novel, such as "Left Guardian" and "Right Guardian," were terms from the Three Kingdoms period. A general is ranked above a commandant, and both left and right guardians (guardians of the field camp) are considered generals. The idea of "left" and "right" is just a way to differentiate between them in this case without needing separate titles.

NINE CHAPTERS OF XIAO AND SHAO: The phrase "when the music of Xiao and Shao reached the ninth movement, phoenixes would come, responding to human virtue" is used to refer to an idealized form of ceremonial music, and it is associated with the legendary Emperor Shun, the last emperor of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. The phoenix is a symbol of celestial blessing and moral order, signifying that the one it visited upon possessed the Mandate of Heaven.

No original source of the music itself survives to this day, but there are reconstructions based on ancient texts that gave us instrument lists and dance formations.

PRINCES, RANKS, AND TITLES: Princes are usually made commandery prince when they come of age (twenty), but only made imperial prince with a bestowed title after they accomplish enough to be granted one, and the title itself is related to this accomplishment. Prince Cheng, for example, means "imperial prince of success," for expelling the Xiongnu in battle. Even before being granted a title, however, they are considered of superlative rank and above the bureaucracy's official ranks that go from one to nine, each divided into Proper and Lesser. Dukes, marquises, and other nobles that were granted hereditary titles by the emperor are also of superlative rank. Imperial Prince is a title just below the heir to the throne and the emperor.

SIX MINISTRIES: While the six ministries are technically equal in rank, they differ greatly in terms of influence. The ministry of personnel is arguably the most powerful, as it controlled the careers of all scholars. This is

why Xiao Yuan going from vice minister of revenue to vice minister of personnel is considered a promotion.

SPRING RECKONING: In counting age by spring reckoning, a person is one the moment they're born, and the age number goes up by one every first day of the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year).

SWORN BROTHERHOOD: Sworn brotherhood (or sisterhood) was a ritual usually between good friends to elevate the relationship by swearing an oath and pledging loyalty to each other. The most famous example of this is the likely fictional Oath of the Peach Garden involving Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, and Guan Yu of the state of Shu Han, as depicted in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

THREE OBEDIENCES AND FOUR VIRTUES: This is the social code for women who lived under Confucianism. A woman must obey first her father, then her husband, and then if she is widowed, she must obey her sons. The four virtues are: feminine conduct, feminine speech, feminine comportment, and feminine works. One can sum these up to being "ladylike."

ZHUGE LIANG: Zhuge Liang was an inventor during the Three Kingdoms period following the end of the Han dynasty, and he was also a strategist for Liu Bei and the imperial chancellor for the state of Shu Han. Already recognized as the most accomplished strategist of his era, he was further mythicized by the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written by

Luo Guanzhong in the 14th century, more than a thousand years after the historical events. Some of the items in Mu Hanzhang's wardrobe in this volume were obviously meant to imitate Zhuge Liang, such as his headscarf made of kudzu and a feather fan.

Allegedly, Zhuge Liang could tell the future from the position of the stars, and he would write seemingly prophetic orders for the generals in silken pouches, to be opened when a situation came to pass.

About the Author

Lv Ye Qian He is a signed writer with Jinjiang Literature City, a member of the China Writers Association, a council member of the Internet Writers Association of Henan, and vice-chair of the Internet Writers Association of Zhengzhou. She's been writing online fiction for fifteen years, specializing in cute and feel-good stories. Her notable works include *The Wife Comes First* and *Mr. Dior*. Her works are popular both in China and abroad, and many have already been adapted into TV dramas, animated series, comics, and radio dramas.

Footnotes

Chapter 41: Shadow

[1] A drinking game wherein the two or more players guess a sum of fingers before all those participating reveal their own.

Chapter 48: Tiger Cub

[2] A traditional Chinese wedding requires an exchange of three letters, each representing steps in the process of marriage, and six rites or customs intended to bring the two families closer together.

[3] An administrative office of a local bureaucrat.

Chapter 55: The Nine Chapters of Xiao-Shao

[4] A poem attributed to the poet Sima Xiangru, to express his love to Zhuo Wenjun, who eloped with him.

[5] A line from “A Phoenix Seeking Its Mate.”

Chapter 62: Letting Go

[6] While not a direct quote, this line heavily draws from a classic Chinese poem by Tang dynasty poet Gu Xiong.

Chapter 63: Ambush

[7] From Ten Wings, a collection of commentaries on the Book of Changes.

Chapter 66: Brined Bird

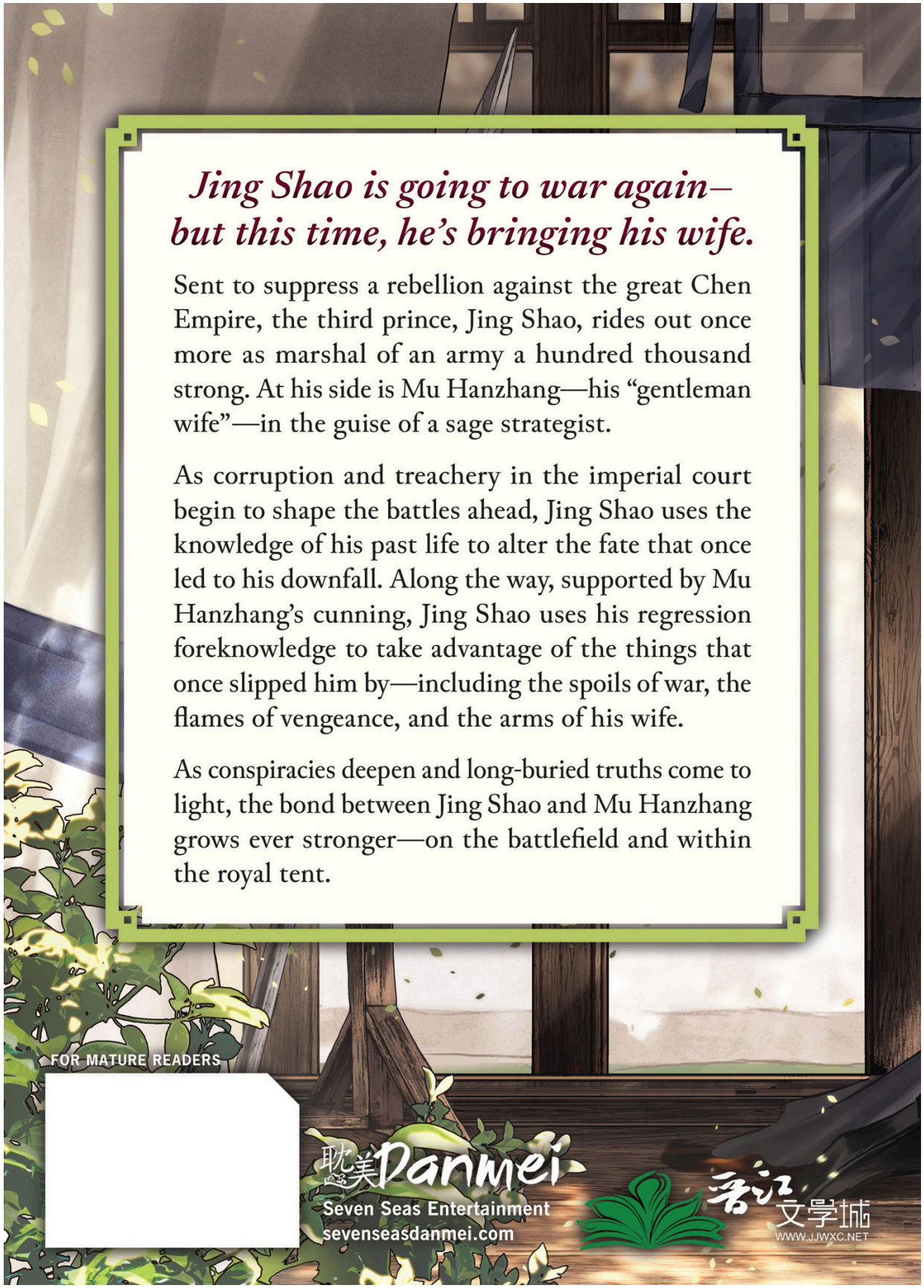
[8] A koi is a symbol of success, while a softshell turtle is a symbol of cowardice.

Chapter 67: A Fortuitous Encounter

[9] Sheets of paper made into burnt offerings for ancestral worship.

Chapter 69: Returning to the Capital

[10] From “On Encountering Sorrow,” a poem by Qu Yuan, prime minister of the state of Chu, lamenting the declining state of his country.



Jing Shao is going to war again— but this time, he's bringing his wife.

Sent to suppress a rebellion against the great Chen Empire, the third prince, Jing Shao, rides out once more as marshal of an army a hundred thousand strong. At his side is Mu Hanzhang—his "gentleman wife"—in the guise of a sage strategist.

As corruption and treachery in the imperial court begin to shape the battles ahead, Jing Shao uses the knowledge of his past life to alter the fate that once led to his downfall. Along the way, supported by Mu Hanzhang's cunning, Jing Shao uses his regression foreknowledge to take advantage of the things that once slipped him by—including the spoils of war, the flames of vengeance, and the arms of his wife.

As conspiracies deepen and long-buried truths come to light, the bond between Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang grows ever stronger—on the battlefield and within the royal tent.

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